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### **Electoral Competition: Analytical Dimensions and Empirical Problems**

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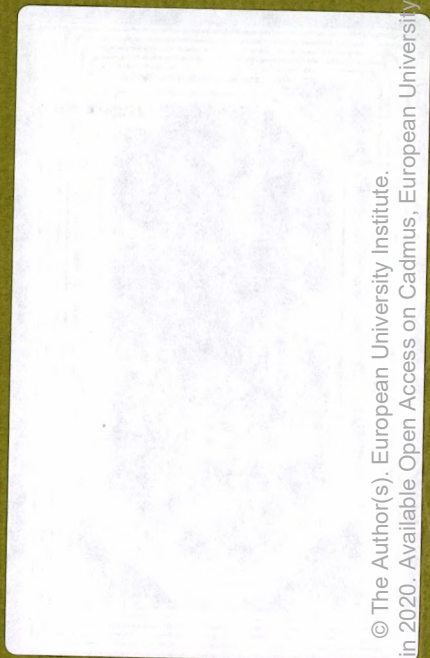
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**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE**  
**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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**Electoral Competition:  
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Empirical Problems**

**STEFANO BARTOLINI**

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The term 'electoral' or 'party competition' is utilised either as a loose term for the entire cycle of electoral, parliamentary and governmental politics, or in the context of the formal modelling of party strategies and voting choices within the narrow limits of assumptions about actors' motives, preferences, and information, or in descriptive accounts of particular election campaigns, party platforms and statements, etc. The use of the term 'competition' in titles of papers, the discussion of the concept itself and its measurement have grown in political science literature since W.W.II. Still the concept remains vague and ambiguous. Its exact theoretical meaning and the kind of empirical phenomena that are indicated by it are unclear for two reasons.

Firstly, too much is borrowed from the economic theory of competition. The assumed fundamental analogy, similarity or resemblance between economic and political competition is erroneous. Competition in politics is altered by the degree of collusion that is inherent in the achievement of the exclusive good of public authority. And the difference is not only one



of degree. Secondly, like economists, political scientists, tend to view competition as a uni-dimensional phenomenon; as a single property of which there can be more or less and whose upper limit is a model of 'perfect' competition. On the contrary, however, the conditions of competition in politics are manifold. Moreover, they neither covary, nor do their maximisation point or reach 'perfection'.

This paper argues these points taking the lead from the unintended 'social value' which is the by-product of competition in politics. This value is taken as the yardstick for discussing the conditions that need to be met in order for competition to produce it. The paper analyses these conditions, claiming that their parallel maximisation is impossible. The debate about political competition must concern the different dimensions and conditions of competition a society wants to maximise in specific historical situations.

### **The unintended 'social value' of competition**

From the early, almost implicit, appraisal of the beneficial effect of trade competition by Adam Smith



competition has achieved a generalised and explicit recognition as an adequate and valuable technique for the satisfaction of almost any need and the attainment of almost any value in almost any sphere of human activity. The exceptional value attributed to the parallel efforts by several parties to obtain the same prize is surprising when one considers the number of fields in which the principle of subordination of individual efforts to the collective goal is still prevalent and legitimised: both private and public bureaucracies, productive processes, family circles and kinship groups. Yet, the 'ideological' trend nowadays prizes competition as the default and prevalent mode. Other principles or techniques of individual forces co-ordination need *ad hoc* justification and legitimation and are reserved to fields where competition is regarded as unattainable or not yet attainable. Whether the satisfaction of human needs and desires and the creation of values is to be left to the competition of individual forces or to their co-ordination in view of a collectively defined goal, is no longer a debated political issue.

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The social legitimacy of competition rests on a point: the net result of competition among individuals for the same prize produce an overall result which is advantageous to a 'third part'. The third gaining part can be identified in individualistic premises as well as in functionalist or systemic ones. In the first perspective, the third gaining part is a collective welfare function maximising each individual function. In the second perspective the advantage is the realisation of some overall value which is positive from the systemic point of view. Georg Simmel has analysed the sociological mechanism of this transformation of individual impulses into socially valuable results<sup>1</sup>. From the formal point of view competition rests on an individualistic principle; the refusal of the subordination of every individual interest and effort to a uniform supra-individual (or group) interest. Competition assumes that each competitor pursues his/her interest, utilising his/her energies according to such interest, and evaluates the results in terms of objective accomplishments. In the form of 'pure' competition, unlike other forms of conflictual interactions, the prize is at stake; it is

not in the hands of either adversary. In 'pure' competition 'each competitor by himself aims at the goal, without using its strength on the adversary... from a superficial standpoint, it proceeds as if there existed no adversary, but only the aim' <sup>2</sup>.

Competition presupposes, therefore, the existence of a common aim, of an objective value desired by all competing parties: be it profit, glory, scientific prestige or power. However, the social legitimization element of competition is that the subjective antagonistic efforts that lead to the realisation of the objective value desired by the competitors, determine as a by-product the realisation of other values outside it. The final result of those antagonistic efforts transform them into an ultimate goal, while from the point of view of the individual competitor, this ultimate goal is neither wanted nor aimed at. In this mechanism lies the value of competition for the social circle of which the competitors are members. 'From the standpoint of the society [competition] offers subjective motives as the means of producing objective social values: and from



the standpoint of the competing parties, it uses the production of objective values as means for attaining subjective satisfaction' <sup>3</sup>. Thus, competition is legitimised from the collective point of view through its capacity to overcome, and indeed deny, the tension between subjective and collective goals. The latter are satisfied by the objective results of competition as opposed to the subjective goals of competitors.

Although resting on the individualistic principle of non subordination of subjective goals, competition finds its legitimation in the fulfilment of socially desirable ends. The latter justifies the losses incurred by individuals in the process. In this sense, individualistic competition should not be seen as opposed to the exclusivity or predominance of the 'social interest', but rather to other 'techniques' for the attainment of the same social interest. The relationship between competition and individualism is not complete without the legitimising reference to the social interest. The legitimation of individualistic competition is equally as social as the legitimation

of competing 'techniques' for the co-ordination of individual efforts to achieve collective goals <sup>4</sup>.

### **Schumpeter, Downs and the 'social value' of political competition**

This conception of the valuable by-product of competition has been extended to politics relatively later than in other fields. The objective value prized by antagonistic individuals and groups in the political sphere is usually identified with political power <sup>5</sup>. The socially valuable by-product of this antagonistic struggle for power is, however, less clearly defined.

A short answer is that competition produces as by-product democracy. The answer is inadequate. Competition presupposes the existence of sets of norms and rules which offer at least a minimal regulatory framework without which it can well degenerate into utter unregulated conflict. Democracy as a set of basic rights and of respected procedures is a necessary condition for political and electoral competition to take place, rather than the other way

round. Pluralism, which is a necessary condition of democracy, need not be 'competitive'. Other principles may and do regulate the interaction among a plurality of actors. Whether politico-electoral competition has a feedback effect in maintaining, defending, stabilising or otherwise improving the basic constitutional capsule of democracy and/or its pluralism is another matter, but it does not change the logical priority of the latter with respect to the former.

With their influential works Schumpeter and Downs<sup>6</sup> are the forerunners of the 'third gaining part axiom' of competition in the political realm. Their work is well known and there is no need to recast it here except for a few points and general implications of their approach. Schumpeter's innovation is to render irrelevant all motivations of political elites with the exception of their shared appetite for power. Once channelled within a 'social capsule'<sup>7</sup> of norms and procedures defining appropriate and acceptable means, these appetites tend to produce social values which are of great interest for third parts and for the



entire society. There is no need to assume that those social values are consciously aimed at by parties in the competitive struggle. This notion presented several advantages. It saved the normative character of democracy by attributing to voters the role of *ultimate instance of selection* of their rulers. At the descriptive level, it enabled the renunciation of the unrealistic degree of political competence, initiative and altruism required by other theories of democracy that Schumpeter labelled 'classic'. It facilitated the unambiguous distinction between democratic and non democratic systems, through the exclusivity of the popular sanction of government by elections. Finally, it helped to rephrase the dilemma of 'classic theories' concerning the democracy-authority relationship . It avoided that the Leviathan, once legitimised by a social contract, be free to operate for the common good.

Schumpeter makes a close link between competition and democracy. His definition of democracy is 'government approved by people' and the democratic system is defined by the formal rules set up for the exercise of

a free, fair and loyal electoral competition. The democratic method is only 'the institutional instrument to arrive at political decisions on the bases of which single individuals obtain the power to decide through a competition which has as object the popular vote' <sup>8</sup>. The procedures which constitute democracy are the constitutional aspect of politico-electoral competition; the social capsule of competition. Actually, his theory is more a theory of democracy than one of competition. His procedural definition makes competition essential to democracy; a defining characteristic of democracy.

Yet Schumpeter does not say much about competition itself. He acknowledges that 'our theory it is of course no more definite than it is the concept of competition for leadership' <sup>9</sup>. Neither does he formally define the socially desirable by-product of politico-electoral competition. The by-product seems to be the peaceful selection of the ruling elites; their submission at fixed intervals to the renewal of the mandate; in short, the institutionalisation of the never ending fight for power. He argues that

between the ideal case of perfect competition, which does not exist, and the real cases in which any electoral contestation of the ruling elite is prevented by force, a whole series of variations exists. Within this range, the democratic method of government fades by 'imperceptible steps' into the authoritarian method <sup>10</sup>. However, he does not specify what makes for this variation. Competition, therefore, is essentially conceived as electoral 'contestability', that is, as openness of the electoral race to challengers. Schumpeter's explicit affirmation concerning the unintended (by the actors) 'social value' of politico-electoral competition stops here: the repeated selection process of the leadership and to its approval by the people.

Downs pushes further Schumpeter's thesis and builds on it explicitly recognising the inspiration <sup>11</sup>. Competition 'is a mechanism whereby political parties which are engaged in what Schumpeter called a 'competitive struggle for the people's vote' are obliged to take account of the preference of the electors for one policy rather than another...' <sup>12</sup>.



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The unintended social value of competition is  
'responsiveness'. One does not need to assume that  
candidates and parties want to respond to voters  
preferences. They are involuntarily forced to do so  
while pursuing their goals of power by maximising the  
necessary vote. Competition obliges elites to take  
into account the preferences of voters. The thesis is  
about how competition compel the transformation of  
each party's motives into the social value of each  
party's honesty, responsibility and responsiveness to  
electors' desires<sup>13</sup>.

This difference between Schumpeter and Downs is not a  
minor one. Downs' model reaches this conclusion on the  
basis of well known assumptions. His voter is a  
rational actor whose choice depends on the comparative  
evaluation of the advantages he/she expects from the  
governmental performance of different parties. He/she  
will offer his/her vote to the party which proposes  
that set of public policies which comparatively offers  
the highest return in terms of well-being as  
subjectively evaluated by the voter. Similarly, the  
parties/candidates offer to the electorate that set of

policies which they perceive will maximise their votes. In the pages where Schumpeter develops his concept of competitive struggle for votes, references to responsiveness are absent. Schumpeter does not say that voters know what they want and are able to evaluate what it is done. Consequently, he does not dare to conclude that elites will give them what they want. The kind of policies that are offered does not concern him very much. On the contrary, one can find in the text several statements that underline the crucial importance of the selection process: ' .. [we] ...make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding'; 'Its choice [of the voter] does not flow from his initiative, but is being turn shaped, and the shaping is an essential part of the democratic process'; 'Voters confine themselves to accepting this bid in preference to others or refusing to accept it'<sup>14</sup>. One could probably say that Schumpeter's vision was that of a sceptical European conservative observer.

With Downs, on the contrary the concept of 'responsiveness' to the voter preferences is the essence of the unintended social value of electoral competition. Both what it is offered by parties/candidates and the actual basis on which the voters judge are not only relevant, but essential to the achievement of the unintended social result of competition. While for Schumpeter 'procedural democracy', which is authenticated in fair electoral competition, offers goods that are independent from the substantive preferences of the voters and the substantive offers of the parties, Downs holds that through competition, procedural democracy transforms itself *ipso facto* into the only possible substantive democracy; a democracy which responds to voter preferences. Schumpeter's goals could be achieved even in the face of 'irrational', uninformed or even foolish or random voting. For Downs, these kind of voters do not force elites to involuntarily respond. Schumpeter's version of the competitive struggle for the vote is even compatible with a strong elitist vision whereby voter perceptions and preferences are shaped, informed, oriented or otherwise manipulated by



elites. Downs' version is not. Schumpeter emphasises the periodic submission of elites to an otherwise unspecified voter judgement. Downs stresses the capacity of elites to respond readily and sympathetically to demands. Thus, government 'approved by' the people it is not to the same thing as government 'responsive to' the people.

An objection to this emphasis on the different unintended social value of competition in Schumpeter and Downs is that the latter only brought to the logical final consequence a line of reasoning already implicit in Schumpeter's premises. However, there is sufficient evidence in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* to demonstrate Schumpeter's mistrust of any substantive link between what people want and what elites offer in the form of a typical dyadic exchange. He was simply unwilling to accept the idea.

### **The conditions of competition**

The definition of the unintended social value achieved through the 'technique' of individual competition applied to politics is important <sup>15</sup>.

Different 'social values' imply different conditions of attainment. If the value is the periodic accountability of governing elites, this can be guaranteed by procedural rules governing the holding of periodic elections and the possibility for several political actors to contest them. The only necessary condition to this end is **contestability**, that is the actual possibility for different political leaders and groups to contest free and fair elections. Unquestionably contestability is a condition of competition, but at the same time, contestability is also a basic defining characteristic of democracy; the one which makes political pluralism possible. Contestability, therefore, is the point where democracy and competition overlap. There are however other often cited conditions of democracy which are not necessary conditions of competition <sup>16</sup>. At the same time, there are other conditions of competition which need not to be regarded as conditions of democracy <sup>17</sup>.

In brief, I will argue that there are three other necessary conditions of competition to consider in

responsiveness is the goal aimed at. They can be identified working backward from responsiveness . What is the key to responsiveness in competitive races? Excluding as irrelevant individual motivations, the standard argument is that leaders in striving to keep or acquire power and office will be constantly worried about how voters are going to react to their actions. This worry is necessarily a function of the extent to which the leader is him/herself exposed to a reasonable threat of electoral sanction. Only if he/she will is worried about the reactions of voters will he/she be 'constantly piloted by the anticipation of those reactions' <sup>18</sup> . Responsiveness is achieved by introducing Friedrich's mechanism of anticipated reactions <sup>19</sup> . It follows that a key condition of competition is the electoral **vulnerability** of incumbents.

In turn, what are the necessary condition of incumbents' vulnerability? The condition is that voters are willing to punish and reward; that is, they are available to modify their electoral choice. If they are not, incumbents are safe and vulnerability is



unthinkable. One does not need to postulate full elasticity of the vote, but some predisposition to electoral switch must be present if vulnerability is to be conceivable. The quota that is necessary, that is to say, the type and number of voters, is impossible to say at this stage. What matters is that such electoral availability will change from one context to another and in time. Therefore this condition will be called electoral **availability** <sup>20</sup>.

If responsiveness depends on vulnerability, and the latter requires voters' availability, what motivates the available voter to act for or against the incumbent government? This must be the differentiation of the offer and the consequent perception of different potential outcomes. Whatever parties/candidates offer (programmes, policies, ideologies, images, etc.) it must be different and clearly 'spelled out' for the voters, in order to make vulnerability not just the chance outcome of random change in voting habits. The anticipated reactions of both government and opposition parties (which are supposed to be the key to responsiveness) must relate

to voters' responses to differentiated and clear offers. The latter enable the voter to decide whether to change his/her electoral preference, and also make intelligible to the elites the reactions of the voters. If products are not differentiated (or their difference is not perceived), voters can punish or reward but no responsiveness will be achieved. I have argued that this is not a problem in a Schumpeterian perspective, where the approval of rulers is the essential aspect and ultimate goal. But it is crucial to the Downsian responsiveness perspective. Offers must therefore be decidable by voters in order to make the entire process intelligible to both voters and elites alike. I will call this condition the **decidability** of the offer <sup>21</sup>.

The argument thus far, has been the following. If 1) we admit that electoral competition is legitimised by a by-product valuable to third-part; if 2) we go beyond Shumpeter's minimal goal and accept responsiveness as the yardstick of competition performance; then 3) the conditions necessary to this end are:

- 1) electoral contestability
- 2) electoral availability
- 3) electoral decidability
- 4) electoral vulnerability

In the subsequent sections each of these conditions will be discussed in more detail.

### **Contestability**

Contestability is a necessary condition of both democracy and competition. Conceptually, this overlap is ill-starred. It generates a great deal of confusion with the result that sometimes competition is equated with democracy and vice versa. In one of the few articles explicitly devoted to this topic, Roberto D'Alimonte has argued the case for an orderly distinction between the two processes insisting that 'democracy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of competition' and that 'competition is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of democracy'. The logical corollary is that there can be democracy without competition, but not competition without democracy. Competition does not derive solely from democracy, and democracy is not the product of



competition. D'Alimonte argues that the condition of freedom for parties to present candidates and programmes and the condition of freedom for electors to chose them 'identify democracy not with competition, but with an open politico-electoral market in which the freedom of access is guaranteed both on the demand side (the electors) and on the supply side (the parties)' <sup>22</sup>. Logically therefore, if the politico-electoral market is open, it need not necessarily be competitive. The conditions of democracy are not the conditions of competition.

In other words, D'Alimonte clearly separates democracy and competition making contestability a property that defines an open electoral market (that is democracy), not a competitive market (that is competition). However, this line of thinking entails a significant drawback. Considering contestability as a property of democracy, means that all democracies should present this feature. Hence, the possibility of regarding different democracies as having dissimilar degrees of contestability is curtailed. If democracies are open electoral markets, do they all have the same

degree of openness? Primarily, the answer is no. I want to keep, within the general concept of competition, a dimension which indicates exactly the extent of openness to contestation of the electoral and political race. There are different political systems or circumstances whose democratic nature is undeniable, but which offer to new and old claimants very different opportunities for electoral contestation .

The usual association of condition of free entry with the idea of the market, and the frequent use of the term 'political' or 'electoral market' is somewhat equivocal. If we take seriously the economic terminology, the market is defined as an institution for the consumption of transactions. A market best performs this function when every buyer who is willing to pay more than the minimum realised price for any class of commodity succeeds in buying the commodity, and every seller who is willing to sell at lower price than the minimum realised price succeeds in selling the commodity . In other words, a market exist when those who are willing to pay more find the appropriate

good, and those who are willing to charge less find the appropriate buyer. A market it is not defined by ease of entry, but by the 'obtainability' of transactions. In this sense a political market condenses both electoral contestability and electoral availability. It is questionable whether this concept is of any use in politics. We should we ready to profoundly revise our categories. For instance, abstentionism becomes the most obvious sign of market failure; the existence of voters unable to find the desired good. At the same time, an electoral market exists when parties offer the same policy package at lower prices (taxation?), and when voters intensely motivated by a particular policy obtain it by 'paying more' (voting twice or what else?).

A further shortcoming in the concept of the 'electoral market' when associated with that of the economic market, is that market and competition are not only different things; they can have little to do with each other. A market can perform efficiently as an institution for the consumption of transactions and still be monopolistic or very non competitive On the



other hand, the market can be highly imperfect in its performance and competitive at the same time <sup>23</sup>. When contestability is analysed in connection with political competition, the key operative issue is: given certain conditions how many actors do we need or can we afford to make competition lively and viable? The economic theory of competition in more than a century of reflection <sup>24</sup>, has given no definite, straightforward answer to the question of how many firms are necessary to make a market competitive, and of what maximum share of the market control by one firm is compatible with competition. The solution offered is the definition of the conditions of 'perfect competition', refined over time. However, to say that there must be numerous traders on both sides of the market does not identify the minimal number necessary to define a competitive market. Moreover, the indicators usually utilised to empirically evaluate the degree of competition are extraordinarily ambiguous. Two examples: concentration ratios are used, arguing that the lower the concentration the more competitive the market, but again the minimum concentration compatible with the definition of

competition is not determined; price homogeneity is often regarded as an indicator of competition (the more prices are homogeneous the more perfect the competition), but the same indicator is often considered by Courts as a phenomenon more suggestive of collusion than of competition <sup>25</sup>. Indeed the high abstraction of the concept of perfect competition and its difficult operationalisation have pushed economists to look for a more realistic and 'workable' concept of competition <sup>26</sup>.

In conclusion, although economists tend to equate competition with openness of the market, they do not offer a useful solution to the problem of contestability in politics. The fact of the matter is that the question of entry is far more important in politics than in economics. It is somewhat paradoxical that economic metaphors are employed to conceptualise it. In politics, one can easily define in terms of contestability the point where competition ends and it is substituted by something else. At the other end of the spectrum, we know that a high fragmentation of the offer is not likely to enhance 'perfect competition'

but rather political chaos. Authority being a public good, success in the competition race offers authority not just over one's own supporters, but over all members of the polity. The indivisible nature of authority leads to strong pushes toward oligarchic tendencies and determines large economies of scale. Competition for private goods allows everyone to deal with the preferred partner, even though this partner is a very minor one. In politics, there is room for only a limited number of parties. New entries are immensely more difficult than in business. It is difficult to carve out a small niche in politics. Besides, small niches may be of very little use. Finally oligarchic tendencies and economies of scale are also fostered by the protection against foreign or international competition which is typical, thus far, of political competition.

This can make the comparative empirical study of political contestability possible and even easier than in economics. Our question should not be what is the 'perfect' but rather what is the 'viable' level of contestability. Several of the factors influencing the



structure of opportunity to contest are institutional and linked to variables like the electoral formula, the requirements for candidature of individuals and lists, the threshold for access to public finance and media coverage, the cost of campaigning in different circumstances, but also to several other factors not strictly institutional. It is therefore better 1) to keep contestability as an important dimension of competition. As will be clear later, the level of contestability impinges upon other conditions of competition; 2) to keep contestability clearly separate from electorate availability, thus avoiding to condensate both of them in the 'open market' metaphor; 3) to consider contestability as a structure of political opportunity; and 4) to concentrate on the empirical factors which may impinge upon the variations in this structure of opportunities for new and old potential claimants.

### **Availability**

In Downs, the rational orientation toward the policies or policy packages offered by parties makes the voter a perfect elastic consumer, who is, by definition,

available to change partisan preference should a better offer be made to him <sup>27</sup>. For electoral competition it is essential that at least a quota of the electorate be available to such change. Such a quota represents what is at stake in the rivalry; the prize of the parallel efforts by competitors; therefore, the incentive for party competition. Without available voters, it is unlikely that parties would be willing to engage in policy competition.

We do not have precise information about the quota of available electorate necessary to make an electoral contest competitive or more competitive than another. The literature on electoral behaviour has accumulated a vast amount of material that indicates the extent to which individual voters and electorates are, in fact, little inclined to respond to changes of the offer with changes in party choice. Strong psychological identifications, resulting from organisational encapsulation, cultural bonds, and the like make important quotas of the national electorates unavailable for voting switches. Thus, the actual level of electoral availability in each given election

or country is an empirical aspect of crucial importance for the study of electoral competition. It is probably true that electoral behaviour studies have not paid sufficient attention to the topic of electoral availability in relation to the issue of the competitive nature of elections. We may simply assume that, *ceteris paribus*, the higher the level of potential availability, the higher the potential level of competition. However, the problem is complicated by the fact that the quantity of the available vote may be less important than its location.

At this juncture, it is important to underscore that the 'available voter' - defined as that voter who is willing to consider modifying his/her party choice - is not the same as the 'opinion voter', the 'informed voter' or, worse, the 'rational voter'. The 'available voter' it is not necessarily informed about issues or programmes, but is sensitive to them <sup>28</sup>. Sensitiveness neither entails strong information, nor capacity of judgement; it simply refers to the availability to be influenced when choosing, by elements which relate to public debate or personal



experience. A switcher can be highly uninformed and uninterested, as much as a strong identifier or a true believer can be politically competent and interested. What is certain, however, is that 1) identifiers have a lower propensity to switch than sensitive voters; 2) voters' sensitivity is higher a) the lower the number of cleavage lines activated or mobilised (segmentation); b) the less the organisational encapsulation of the electorate; c) the more diffuse the network of groups and the less interlocking is the link between specific political organisations (parties) and corporate groups outside the electoral domain; 3) parties, if compelled, look for switchers irrespective of who they are.

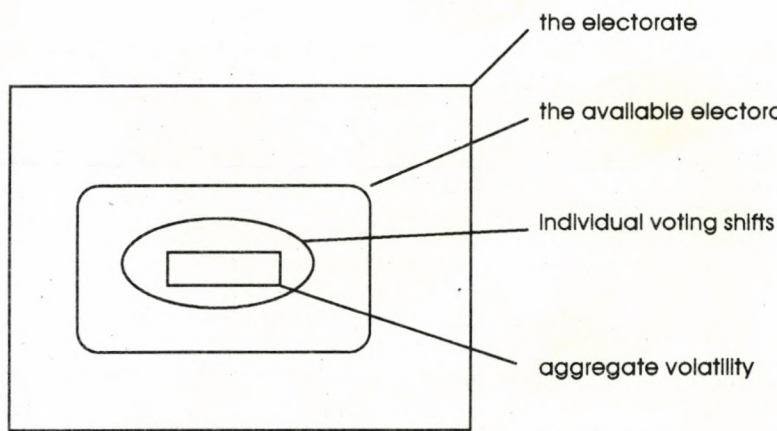
Aggregate measures of electoral volatility (party volatility as well as block of parties or system total volatility <sup>29</sup>) are used to characterise the volatility of different electorates at different points in time. Their importance should not be underestimated, notwithstanding their obvious limitations in the cancelling out of voting shifts of different signs which occur in the aggregation. For instance,

aggregate volatilities are by and large the only thing party leaders perceive of the potential electoral availability in their system. They are also the only certain element which enables them to ascertain the electorate's reactions to their strategic choices and moves. Individual level volatility has also been studied through transition matrices of voting switches giving a more precise estimation of the amount of electors who actually change their mind from one election to the next <sup>30</sup>. Unfortunately, these studies are not numerous and this kind of information is not collected routinely for elections. Moreover, their utilisation for the characterisation of the available electorate as the prize of the competitive efforts by the parties/candidates, is rare.

A further problem is that, whether aggregated or individual, these measures refer to actual voting shifts. But electoral availability is poorly measured by actual voting shifts. An elector can be 'at stake' in the sense of being available to change her/his partisan choice even if in the end he/she will record the vote for the same party as before. The amount of

actual voting changes underestimates electoral availability, as it records only those available electors who actually switched their preference leaving aside those who did not. In the global electorate, aggregate volatility underestimates individual voting shifts, and the latter underestimates the actual electoral availability, as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Aggregate and individual voting shifts and electoral availability



In a recent article, Eijk and Oppenhuis have suggested ways to operationalise electoral availability at the individual levels which are very promising as they are conceptualised in close relation to the issue of



electoral competition. They do not use the term availability or available electorate but they pick up this dimension with survey data in which people are asked about their willingness to vote for parties other than the one they prefer <sup>31</sup>. People are ranked according to the probability of voting for each of the parties in their party system. Voters range from those who are likely to vote for only one party to those who are likely to vote for several different parties. This method allows the differentiation of both different electorates and different sections of the same electorate, according to their electoral availability, although the authors tend to dichotomise their result in terms of electors 'beyond' competition and electors 'subject to intense competition' (pp. 60-61). Of great interest is their application of the data to individual parties. Through a number of operational choice, of no concern in this discussion, they compare the available vote for a party (those electors who declare it to be a possible choice) with the actual vote the party eventually gets at the polls. The term they use is 'competitive performance of political

parties' and it measures the relationship between the potential and the actual vote collected by the party.

The merit of this approach is not only that it suggests a direction to properly operationalise the dimension of electoral availability, but also that it relates this aspect to the patterns of electoral competition. Eijk and Oppenhuis tend to equate electoral availability with electoral competition, leaving aside what I consider to be other important condition of electoral competition. This is however, a minor point. They demonstrate that it is possible not only to properly conceptualise, but also to come to comparative inter-party and inter-system comparisons of electoral availability, seen as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of electoral competition.

### **Decidability**

Given the existence of electoral contestability and electoral availability, what happens if the parties do not want to compete? Are there conditions which push parties to limit or to avoid altogether the decidability of products offered? Although most of the

versions of the competitive theory of democracy and, in particular, formal models of party competition refer to the fact that parties offer programmes, policies, ideologies, images, issues or whatever else, not much is said about the decidability quality of these offers necessary to guarantee, improve, maximise or otherwise substantiate electoral competition. Is the quality of the offer so unimportant for electoral competition?

In formal models of voting choice an important role is given to what I define here as decidability. The net utility of the victory of the voter's preferred candidate's in Downs <sup>32</sup>, or the differential benefits of outcomes (the party differential), in W. H. Riker and P. C. Ordeshook's 'calculus of voting' <sup>33</sup> indicate how the voter perceives the difference it will make for her/him if party or candidate X or Y is elected. This obviously depends on product differentiation. If products are undifferentiated this term is zero and the probability of affecting the outcome (which I will discuss in the next section as vulnerability) becomes irrelevant. Ths, party



differentials count, but in formal models of competition they are reduced to party distances in a space either chosen as an example, or postulated or drawn from some data set.

For party competition to produce leadership responsiveness, the decidability of what is offered to voters is a necessary condition. The notion of choice is essential. Voters must perceive differences between parties/candidates in terms of emphasis, priority or performance in order to make a choice. Therefore, whatever the party offers, it must be 1) different from what others offer and 2) clearly perceived by voters. Policy or issue position differentiation among parties, visibility and clarity of these differences for the voter are what I call here decidability.

There are several reasons why little attention is paid to the decidability of the offer in theories of competition. Firstly, the decidability of the offer it is not regarded as essential, as the emphasis is on the competitive selection of political personnel. I have already discussed this perspective dealing with

Schumpeter's position. Secondly, economic analysis from which political analogies are drawn, does not attribute much importance to this aspect. Quite the contrary, in a perfect competition model, goods should be as homogeneous as possible. The third and more important reason in my opinion, is that somehow the decidability of the offer is implicitly - not explicitly - postulated. The differentiation of products offered is assumed to result from other features of the competitive process.

Rational choice theorists consider voter' preferences as 'intrinsic', that is, as 'exogenous to the process of party competition' <sup>34</sup>. This means that voters have preferences which are independent from the offer made by politicians and parties. Obviously this is a crucial assumption, as one could well imagine that voter preferences are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the process of party competition and are in no way exogenous to it. Formal theorists, whether or not they discuss this issue, come to the conclusion that preferences are exogenous <sup>35</sup>. The second assumption about voters' preference in economic models

of political competition is that they are stable during the process of competition itself. Combining the endogenous versus exogenous shaping of voter preferences, with their stability or change during the process of electoral competition, one can draw the following scheme:

See Table 1 at page 86

Clearly, a structure of preferences that is endogenously produced throughout the process of competition can not be stable and therefore this type is impossible <sup>36</sup>. Of the remaining three types that normally postulated by economic models of competition is Type I. By definition, the structure of preference is exogenous, and, in the short run, such a structure is also stable. That is, it is not even affected by forces outside the competition process itself.

What form does party competition takes under these conditions? The only thing parties/candidates can do,



is acquire information about the stable and exogenously determined structure of preferences and try to adapt to it. They also need to engage in advertising campaigns, trying to inform the public of their stances. That is all. Party strategy is only an adaptive effort. Whatever complicating factors are added (activists attitudes, organisational features, etc.), will only make the achievement of this pre-defined adaptation more or less easy and efficient .

Type II is a variation of the theme. Keeping the exogenous formation of the structure of preferences, the simplification of the stable structure can be abandoned. Preferences can be modified even in the short term, but these modifications will be the result of factors external to party competition: cultural and value changes? Socio-structural modifications? Media coverage of events? It is not necessary to identify precisely the sources of change, but it is important to stress that in any case they are exogenous to the process of party competition. Parties, even in this

case are just adaptive machines. They either can or cannot see the changes and the potential gains or losses associated with them, but they can neither influence them, nor how voters perceive them. Electoral competition is ethero-directed.

I do not want to discuss the realism or the consequences of the assumption of the exogenous formation of preferences. What interests me is that in this static perspective, the decidability problem becomes marginal by definitional fiat. If they cannot shape preferences, parties must adapt to them. Their offers are meant to meet autonomously formed preferences. If the offer is, for instance, not very decidable - that is, undifferentiated and unclear party stands predominate - this can only be the result of preferences. If preferences can not be influenced what other strategy can parties adopt? How can they, for instance, collude if their collusion does not modify the preferences of voters? How can they follow an alternative strategy of maximum decidability? The only basis on which they can decide on one strategy rather than another is the shape of

the given preferences. Any other solution will only expose them to totally unproductive risks. Once the preferences are made unmodifiable, the offer becomes but a function of such preferences. In this sense, I believe that the assumption of the exogenous nature of preferences implicitly contributes to the rendering irrelevant of the problem of the decidability of the offer.

Let's consider the situation in Type III. The picture changes: the structure of electoral preferences is not exogenous to party competition but is influenced, if not determined, by it. Parties and politicians believe they can influence the preference of electors. This implies that they can do something other than adapt; to get the electors on their side <sup>37</sup>. Adaptation to the structure of preferences and modification of the structure of preferences interplay; begetting different mix of adaptation and modification, and debate about the degree of adaptation and modification.

The structure of electoral preferences is changing and these changes depend to a certain extent on what



parties and politicians do; depend on the offer. Party competition here is identified as the process through which parties and elites try to shape and modify to their advantage the structure of the electoral preferences. That is, exactly the contrary of what is postulated by rational choice theory. The way the electoral preferences are structured is not irrelevant to party competition, but is the object, essence and core of party competition itself. It is in the context of a 'preference shaping' type of competition that decidability becomes crucial.

Once decidability is regarded as a necessary condition for competition, deliberate strategies of increasing offer differentiation or of blurring party stances enter into empirical study. We must proceed from the recognition that political competition is built on a number of strong confining conditions of product differentiation. We can identify three processes of competition avoidance or restraint on the offer side:

- 1) those situations in which the very interest or purpose of the group of suppliers necessitates a

structure which strongly limits or even prohibits certain offers to be made;

2) those situations in which the interest and purpose of the suppliers are accessible to competition practices and competition as such is not limited, but the means through which it is pursued are more or less restricted;

3) those situations in which the interest and purpose of the suppliers are accessible to competition practices but competition is limited in its scope as a result of sheer collusion practices which supersede competition itself.

The first case concerns the socio-political capsule of competition. The set of norms, social practices and legal provisions which define the conditions of competition are normally protected from the basic principle of chance which operates in competition. The very interest and purpose of the group identify themes in which electoral competition, in terms of differentiated offers, is highly limited, as in the cases of symbols of national identity, unity,

solidarity, and more generally sets of formal and informal constitutional rules.

The second case is that of the restriction of the means through which competition obtains. The principle which supersedes competition is often that of the mechanical equality of the parts <sup>38</sup>. For instance equality of competitive means is often invoked and aimed at by agreement on sharing equal access to television broadcasting, equal attention in written media, proportional access to public resources for electoral competition, or ceilings of the total amount of resources candidates and parties can invest in political advertising. Even the proper style of campaigning and political advertising may be the object of inter-individual (that is voluntarily reached) or super-individual (imposed by law or morality standards) limitations. The interesting question is whether the restriction of certain competitive means actually affects the substance of policy and issue competition. Certain restrictions do not limit competition, but, on the contrary, they enhance true competition by freeing it from



unnecessary elements. Preventing the diversion of competition from diminishing the capacity of competitors, these restrictions can force competition to concentrate on the offer itself. It is therefore possible for competitors to establish agreements in a specific area of competition without weakening it in other areas. These inter-individual restrictions may grow to free competition from all those things which do not constitute competition, because in principle they can cancel each other out without effect. As shopkeepers can agree on fixed opening hours or sale periods, so political actors can agree on the muting or soft pedalling of certain means and techniques of competition. Yet, one should not forget that the means of competition consist, in some cases, of advantages offered to the third part, which may bear the brunt of the excessive restrictions on such means. These agreements can, in extreme cases, affect the very essence of competition, that is, to bring about forms of collusion and cartellisation that become plans for feeding the market according to a pre-established design.

This is in fact, the third form of restriction on competition which is the most important in this context. What is actually restricted is the **scope** of the offer in fields in principle accessible to political competition. The amount of forces and situations which lead to collusion and cartellisation practices among political competitors could scarcely be underestimated. First of all, politics is inherently collusive as a consequence of the exclusiveness of authority. The high threshold for access to authority requires a high degree of concentration of the market. The great deal of necessary coalition politics, is, in essence, cartellisation practice. In the processes of coalition making (electoral, parliamentary or governmental policy positions, issues etc. are compromised, diluted or simply totally muted so as to obtain the economy of scale which is sought for. Coalition politics may indeed maximise other necessary conditions of competition (see below), but unquestionably they bring about a restriction on the scope of competition on the offer side.

The multiplicity of the sites of party interaction is a second incentive to collusion. Contrary to economic competition, political competition takes place in different and yet inter-linked sites or arenas. Parties compete in the electoral arena, but they then (as before) continue their interaction in other arenas like the legislative-parliamentary one and the governmental one. The same party may take different policy positions in the various arenas. Legislators group or regroup in different ways than they do at election time. The decidability of issues and policies may be voluntarily limited by the interplay of the electoral, legislative and governmental party systems. Opportunities to boost the salience of issues exploitable in the electoral arena, and which may concern sizeable sectors of public opinion, may not be taken up or may be dampened because they are damaging in other arenas; in light, for instance, of the potential consequences for the successive legislative bargaining. Possibilities in the legislative or governmental arena may be left unexplored because of the reluctance to expose oneself to the risk of an election that one is unwilling to fight on those



terms. It is possible to defeat an incumbent government with alliances and tactical moves which, however, may be detrimental in the electoral channel if obliged to fight an election in those terms <sup>39</sup>.

In other words, the necessary interplay between electoral competition and legislative bargaining may lead to the downplay of those issues regarded as favourable in one arena but possibly damaging in another

40 .

Finally, collusion and cartellisation may be achieved through co-ordinated manipulation of issue saliency. Analytically, they can be classified as follows:

- 1) blurred and unclear party position or party policy on certain issues;
- 2) slow transformation of certain problems from clear partisan to valence issue;
- 3) transfer of certain issue from the domain of politically legitimised decision making to domains where different criteria of legitimation prevail.

The discussion of these situations will require far more space than that available in this paper. I limit the argument to a few points. The transformation of divisive issues in valence issues is a process which weakens decidability. Position issues are 'those that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined. And ... 'valence' issues [are] those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate' <sup>41</sup>. Position issues are inherently divisive as they involve explicit for or against choices. Valence issues, on the contrary entail only one value (positive or negative) that is shared by the vast majority and they are essentially non-divisive <sup>42</sup>.

In an article devoted to the style of competition, Schneider proposes the following typology of issues which combines the clarity of the party stance dimension with that of the more or less divisive nature of issues <sup>43</sup>:

See Table 2 at page 87

The dimension of party choice, clear/non-clear concerns whether the voter perceives a difference between the parties on a particular problem. This dimension, which Schneider calls 'quality of choice' <sup>44</sup>, can be measured by voter ability to discriminate party positions and consequently, voter shifts correlated with issue positions. The 'divisiveness' dimension points to issues being defined more as position or more as valence. The two together refer to the decidability of the offer.

Since position issues are divisive, by definition the choice is offered. However, party positions can be blurred and unclear.



For 'valence issues' the question is more complex. A 'choice' in position terms is simply the anticipation that one solution is better than the other, and that, therefore, it makes sense to change or not to change.

In the case of valence issues, choice essentially comes down to the question of whether one party can do better than the other that which is defined as a matter of general and agreed concern. The choice of specific remedies and policies is less defined, being overshadowed by questions of 'competence'. When a general solution is desired by the vast majority, the specific remedy is less in the forefront than is the general perception of the non incumbents to do better than the incumbents. 'The failure of choice would be evidenced by the widespread perception that no alternative government will work. The decision to vote one way or the other could mean little in terms of anticipated performance' <sup>45</sup>.

From the point of view of what I regard as the decidability of the offer, divisive issues on which party stance is clear (partisan issues), are by far

the most decidable. Valence issues with a clear partisan orientation (election issue) may still be decidable. A valence issue is not divisive, but this does not imply that it is not controversial. Its salience, to whom is blame attributed, whether voters perceive a difference between parties in terms of priorities and performance, makes for its more or less controversial and debatable nature. The level of decidability seems to decline progressively when party stances are unclear and it is at its lowest when, at the same time, issues are not divisive. If parties can shape preferences through competition, they will tend to do so by defining issues as more or less divisive and by making their stances more or less well defined. That is by manipulating decidability.

Sheer removal of issue from the agenda is a more complicated but not infrequent solution. Issues and policy offer may be removed by 'constitutionalising' them or by referring them to other domains of legitimisation of decision making. By 'constitutionalisation', I mean the institutionalisation of goals which therefore tend to

be kept safely out of the policy domain regulated by parties. If the requirement of no public deficit (or of a maximum public deficit), or the prohibition of sending armed forces outside the national territory are constitutionalised, then the issue is to a large extent removed from public debate, and the need for parties and candidates to take clear stands is reduced correspondingly. Alternatively, issues and policies can be transferred to domains where legitimisation principles other than political exist. Issues may be *pre-defined* and left to the decisions of bodies where competence is the key resource: defending the value of the currency can be defined as an institutional goal and thus made the preserve of central bank authorities; controlling the political fairness of the mass media can be devolved to bodies and authorities on the basis of the same principle. Issues and policies may also be *pre-defined* and *pre-decided* by internationally accepted or imposed priorities and goals (EEC decisions; IMF requirements, GATT agreements, etc.) which may be used by political parties as a defence against taking clear political stands on controversial questions. Finally, issues and



policies can be left to the actors who control the resources for their implementation <sup>46</sup>; to forms of 'negotiated order' in which key economic actors agree to regulate macro-economic policies of interest to the parts <sup>47</sup>. Whether the principle invoked is efficiency, competence, or resource control the actual result may be an important muting of party differentials in key domains. The amount of policies which are 'pre-defined' and 'pre-decided' in this way may be large and varies from country to country as well as over time.

This long list of potential sources of collusive behaviour on the part of political competitors for votes is not meant to 'denounce' or otherwise 'fault' these practices, but simply to bring attention to the point that their diffusion is a crucial empirical dimension in the study of the conditions of competitive politics <sup>48</sup>. However, there are barriers and obstacles to political cartellisation and collusion. The first is imperfect knowledge of the consequences of rivalry and of the profit of collusion. When considering collusion,

parties/candidates are uncertain as to the profit of this strategy as opposed to an adversarial competitive strategy. The second obstacle is the difficulty of determining the division of profits among colluders. Parties may be in disagreement and/or scared of the potential disagreement over how the advantages of collusion should be then distributed. In the first case uncertainty concerns the unforeseen potential reactions of the voters. In the second case uncertainty concerns the divisions of the advantages among the actors. In both cases, the result is rather unstable choices between more co-operative and more competitive relationships in the struggle for the vote.

It goes without saying that the investigation of the dimension of decidability is removed by *fiat* if the structure of preferences is taken as exogenous to party competition. In empirical reserach, it is impossible to postulate or take for granted competition on the offer side. Laying too much emphasis on competition, we may easily forget that collusion is the essence of politics, that 'political

classes' have much in common at stake to defend, that political elites can easily agree to share a value through the voluntarily equalisation of effort rather than fighting for it, that competition on the offer side is not a natural outcome and requires special conditions in order to flourish. Continuous efforts are made to avoid it and therefore, continuous costs are met in order to preserve it<sup>49</sup>. Paraphrasing Gaetano Mosca's famous point about military rule, the real question is not why parties sometimes collude, but why they do not do so all the time.

### **Vulnerability**

In economic life and theory, the existence of a given product does not preclude the existence of a different one that can be chosen instead. The products offered in a more or less decidable way to voters are mutually exclusive. Given the coercive nature of politics, if a policy is implemented a different policy cannot be implemented at the same time. There cannot be two agencies legislating and/or regulating on the same



issue.

The exclusivity of policy and legislation rests on the exclusivity of government. There is a threshold for gaining the right to coerce

In economic life, a firm which sells 49% of a product is not a failure. In politics it may well be.

This basic difference is not often discussed in articles which focus on economic and political competition <sup>50</sup>. Vulnerability, originates from and is meaningful only in relation to the exclusivity of political authority. For this condition of competition, no analogy with the market and economic competition seems possible.

It is not necessary to discuss this problem at length as a rich literature already exists. Vulnerability may be defined as the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted and replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of changes in voter of partisan preference. In effect, vulnerability

has two psychological effects: 1) parties perceive the chance of gaining or loosing the exclusive good of public authority; 2) voters perceive an increase in the potential impact of their vote on the final outcome of governmental formation and/or renovation.

In the American context, there has been a great deal of post-war studies concerning this particular dimension of competition. The reference point of these studies was of course the American two party system where it was easier to collapse several conditions of competition into the single one of vulnerability. Therefore, vulnerability is regarded as being basically the same thing as competition, although the phenomenon was given different names. The names range from 'closeness of the electoral outcome' to 'uncertainty of the electoral result'; from 'performance sensitivity' to 'decisiveness of elections for governmental turnover'; from 'changeability'<sup>51</sup> to 'competitiveness' or 'systemic competition'. The term 'performance sensitivity' implies that the incumbent position is vulnerable as a result of the sensitivity of available voters to its

performance when in government. This is to say and to demand far too much. The basic difference between the other terms is that some of them tend to stress actual aspects of governmental turnover, while others tend to stress the potential turnover. Schlesinger, for instance, positively refers his concept of vulnerability to the 1) number of elections won by each party; and 2) the rapidity with which parties alternate in office. He argues that 'perhaps the rate of alternation is even more important in giving the participants a sense of competition than is the overall division of victories'<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, 'decisiveness' of elections for governmental outcome' or 'changeability' stress the actual result of competition. Insisting on actual alternation means that at every given moment the perception of the vulnerability of government is the result of past experiences. The obvious critique is that vulnerability may be present without actual turnover taking place or vice versa.

To stress 'closeness' of electoral returns in terms of votes or seats, or symmetry of the distribution of



votes and seats <sup>53</sup>, or the concept of 'uncertainty' of electoral outcome' refers to the psychological effect linked to the absence of safety, rather than the actual result. Closeness and uncertainty may not result into turnover but still provide their supposed effect on competition <sup>54</sup>. Yet, without any prior information, how can the level of closeness or symmetry which would guarantee vulnerability be ascertained? What if close elections were repeated over time with the same governmental outcome?

Both the dimension of actual past record and present uncertainty have to be incorporated into the idea of vulnerability. Some element of the objective closeness of electoral returns must give rise to a sense of unsafety for incumbents and a sense of opportunity for opponents, but at the same time this objective base can not be defined without reference to some record of past experience. For this reason, in the great variety of measures of electoral vulnerability experimented in the context of the federal and state level as well as for presidential, governors and legislative elections in the United States <sup>55</sup>, I prefer the kind of

measures which are expressed in the form of a ratio between some objective element of closeness of the race at a given moment and some objective element indicating the past competitive performance of the system. I regard as very interesting Stern's measure<sup>56</sup>. In a given unit (local township in his case), he takes the vote for the majority party/candidate and relates it to the standard deviations of the same majority vote in the previous elections. If that vote minus two standard deviations is still over 50%, then the government is safe. If that vote minus two standard deviations is below 50% but the same vote minus one standard deviation is above 50% then the contest is classified as marginal. If that vote minus a standard deviation falls below 50% then government is competitive. In so doing, Stern's measure links the majoritarian advantage of the winning party to the past variability of this margin<sup>57</sup>. If one were to substitute the three terms 'safe', 'marginal' and 'competitive' with the single dimension of the level of vulnerability, we go from a minimum vulnerability in the first case to the maximum in the latter. I am currently working on incumbents' vulnerability using a

measure that shares the same logic. For each given election, I consider the distance from the majority thresholds of each party/vocation/candidate. This distance is then related to the average aggregate volatility of previous elections along the incumbent versus non-incumbent dimension. For instance, a 10% margin over the 50% threshold does not give a secure indication of the real or perceived vulnerability of the incumbent unless it is related to the average aggregate voting switch which takes place between incumbents and the opposition. If that average aggregate voting shift is 20%, that a 10 % margin does not make for safety. If, on the contrary, it is only 2%, then a 10 % majority distance makes for considerably little vulnerability<sup>58</sup>. The same level of closeness of the votes between government and opposition makes government safe in a system with low electoral availability along the line which separates majority and opposition, and vulnerable in a system with high volatility.

There is no need to discuss at any great length these measures in this paper. Suffice it to underline that



the elements of uncertainty and unsafety associated with the concept of incumbents' vulnerability are not fully tapped by measures of closeness or distance alone. Something is required which indicates the perception of incumbents and opponents about the likeliness of that distance to be matched by aggregate voters shifts. Symmetry of voting can be a good proxy for information we do not have, but strictly speaking it is not adequate.

Vulnerability is a system property. It refers to the unit of the party system. It results from specific configurations of the number, the strength and the alliance-opposition relationships among the units of the system without belonging to any of them. It presents important empirical links with other conditions of competition like contestability, availability and decidability, but it is independent from all of them. Only two conditions can be regarded as necessary for the maximisation of governmental vulnerability:

- 1) the visibility of the division line between government and opposition;

2) an average electoral availability along the incumbent/opposition line large enough to approach (or bypass) the majority margin of incumbents.

In relation to the first condition, the visibility of the incumbents/opposition camps is decisively blurred in cases of : 1) greatly oversized majorities; 2) truly minority government (to the extent that they rest on collusion with the opposition in parliament); 3) frequent change in government composition during the legislature. Truly minority government poses a special challenge to the concept of vulnerability. Minority governments are vulnerable by definition as their survival rests on some sort of collusion with non-governmental parties. However, their high parliamentary vulnerability may result in their electoral invulnerability. The problem is what electoral (non parliamentary) mechanism would make a minority government vulnerable. One can imagine that minority governments are relatively insensitive to electoral returns because their *raison d'être* is not electoral. At the same time we are not prepared to go so far as to say that the electoral process is

irrelevant to them. We have to find some better argument than the 'non applicable' one in this case.

As far as the second condition is concerned, it is often argued that what matters for vulnerability is more the 'decisive location' of the available electorate than its sheer quantity (although one can say that the higher the quantity the higher the likelihood that a sufficient share of it will be located so as to contribute to vulnerability). The 'decisive location' of available voters is unquestionably crucial only if a spatial representation of politics is given. Whether a spatial dimension of politics exists (in the electorate), the amount of dimension it has and how good an instrument to describe concrete historical situation it is, remain empirical questions. Therefore, we can not make the 'decisive location' a necessary condition. What matters is 'sufficient' incumbent/opposition electoral availability. Spatial location can not be incorporated as a 'necessary' condition for vulnerability. As for 'symmetry' (or closeness) of the vote/seats distribution, which is often listed as a necessary



condition, I have already argued that it is not. It can, perhaps, be considered a facilitating one.

### **The relationship among the different dimensions of competition**

In Table 3, I have summarised the main points concerning the four dimensions of competition when it is regarded as a process leading to elite responsiveness to voters preferences. The four conditions of contestability versus closure, availability versus encapsulation, decidability versus collusion and vulnerability versus safety of tenure identify dimensions which can be maximised or minimised. If contestability is minimised, the process can go so far as to endanger pluralism, which is also as we said, a defining condition of democracy. Beyond the minimum necessary level of pluralism, contestability can vary, but a maximisation of contestability is likely to bring about excessive fragmentation on the offer side. When the forces of voter encapsulation are so strong as to lead to the extinction of electoral availability, then electoral transactions are also extinct. Whatever change is made

to the political offer, it is unlikely that buyers will be found. On the other hand, the maximisation of electoral availability points to a situation in which every voter is likely to change his/her mind. The consequence is an exceptional volatility from election to election.

See Table 3 at page 88

When decidability is brought to a minimum, party positions on issues and policies are blurred and unclear, issues tend to slide from 'divisive' to 'valence' or to be simply muted and/or transferred to another domain of decision making different from the electoral political channel. Consequences of collusive tendencies may include growing political dissatisfaction, voter defection and even mass disenfranchisement. At the other extreme, a situation

is defined in which the maximisation of decidability brings about very high policy differentials and a very adversarial style of politics. This tendency can result into clear ideological polarisation. Finally, safety of governmental tenure strongly undermines responsiveness. Yet, maximisation of vulnerability has its own drawbacks. In the extreme case it could bring about a 'permanent campaign' syndrome<sup>59</sup>: frequent feedback on government popularity, on the relative salience of issue in the mass public, and on the preference of the public (even on issues not yet articulated by the opinion makers); more awareness by citizens of governmental actions or possible actions and better chances to react more visibly to them correspondingly, governments' sense of being more exposed to political pressures from the general public; constant watching of opinion polls by politicians in order to evaluate the response of public opinion to policy options

; politicians belief in their capacity to immediately estimate the costs in terms of support for specific decisions (far greater than the capacity to appreciate the gains in support of the same decisions);



postponement of critical and divisive decisions by elected officials for fear of alienating potential supporters.

It follows that each dimension impinges on the other not in a linear and additive way, but in a rather contradictory one. High contestability may allow high fragmentation. Intense minorities may find it more preferable to enter the electoral race than to articulate their demands within more encompassing political parties, even if motivated by single-issues or small range concerns . This is likely to have a negative effect on the clear distinction between government and opposition, and therefore on vulnerability. High vulnerability may lead to low decidability and no differentiation of the political offer. 'Perfect' vulnerability is achieved when two parties(coalitions) of equal size compete for a few median voters (in theory just for the median voter). Unless the degree of contestability allows for credible third party alternatives, party willingness to shape clear and alternative choices to voters is likely to be nil in this case <sup>60</sup> . In order to ensure

decidability, one needs a certain amount of electoral availability which is not functional to vulnerability. At the same time, excessively volatile electorates, resulting for declining cultural and organisational ties, may bring about an issue or policy 'balkanised' electorate with no dimensionality whatsoever <sup>61</sup>. A certain amount of vote identification and vote stability is necessary to allow parties to plan the offer, to interpret the reaction of the electorate, and to reduce the risks of collusion resulting from their failing in this respect.

In my view, a conspicuously attractive interaction takes place between decidability and vulnerability. Decidability requires clear alternative choices: a clear-cut policy or programmatic profile of candidates and parties (coalitions); no muting of major and divisive issues; no transformation of divisive issues in valence issue. Vulnerability rests on institutional solutions which avoid fragmentation (majority formula), and allow clear attribution of political responsibility (unitary executive, direct

responsibility). It also rests on political conditions: no disagreement on fundamentals (avoid that performance evaluation be overshadowed by consideration of system defence); a broad electoral coalition open to all sectors of the population; the absence of polarising ideological issues; the bypassing of the historical divisions and the identities linked to them; a strong orientation of the vote toward performance-evaluation.

To what extent are these two sets of conditions mutually compatible? Is it possible to simultaneously maximise decidability and vulnerability? Probably not. A vicious circle may exist in which increasing responsiveness implies increasing credibility of sanctions for incumbents; the latter implies that increasing weight is given to median voter preferences by both governing and opposition parties; the latter implies the increasing non-differentiation of political offer, declining policy competition, declining decidability and, finally, reduced responsiveness to preferences. Certainly, sensitive far-from-median voters can exit. But the opportunity



to have their preferences considered is linked to their chance of obtaining an alternative new party. Maximising competition as vulnerability in the absence of easy exit options will result in the widening of what Matthews calls the 'ideological gap' between governmental positions and sections of the electorate<sup>62</sup>. The need to be 'competitive' at the governmental level may prevent parties from taking stands on controversial and divisive issues. In situations of high vulnerability established parties may be unwilling to take the risk of identifying clearly with policies and issues highlighting the cost to be shared by specific groups in exchange for broadly collective advantages whose electoral returns are uncertain. In these situations, there is a strong incentive to define issues in such a way that no opposing sides are identifiable, and to push parties to argue more about who is more competent or capable of assuring the achievement of consensually accepted principles, rather than arguing about which principles should be embodied in policy. For these reasons, new parties emerge which concentrate on issues removed and transformed into 'valence'

problems. Having no traditional constituency to defend, they can appeal across partisan lines. However, if new parties are needed for taking partisan stands on new issues, then a decline in the vulnerability at the system level may well be the result, so that what is gained in decidability is lost in vulnerability of incumbents.

Some recent tendencies of electioneering <sup>63</sup>, with their stress on candidate-centric campaigning, on fund raising as 'primary', on heavy concentration on radio and television campaign, packaging of candidates by professional advisers, well prepared, media controlled public appearances, parading before carefully screened audiences (up to the point of reducing appearances to chat-shows and 'infomericals') are the correlate of high leadership vulnerability, but they also tend to deprive the public, even the most informed part of it, of any real choice.

There may be too much pragmatism and incrementalism, as has been suggested, and the bringing of controversial issues before the public may be

welcomed. The increasing sharpness of policy alternatives will provide voters with the opportunity of making choices between clear-cut policy sets <sup>64</sup>. But there might also be too little influence of voters on government and leadership selection, as others argue. Thus, we should welcome the bringing about of coalition formula, of electoral institutions, of forms of government, of chief executive selection which will provide the voter with a direct say in the selection of alternative government. If we call the first good 'to have a choice' and the second 'to have a say', we end up with a difficult predicament: choice without say or say without choice.

An empirical study of competition has no way to escape its contradictory multi-dimensionality. This can only be avoided by stipulative decisions or assumptions. If the various conditions or dimensions of competition have complex relationships among themselves, this means that electoral competition cannot be conceived as a linear process going from zero or a minimum to a maximum, theoretically definable as 'perfect competition' <sup>65</sup>. This appealing metaphor comes to us



from economics but it is not applicable in politics if we agree that the parallel maximisation of all conditions of competition is not only impossible, because of the afore mentioned interactive effect among them, but also detrimental. One can not therefore speak of more or less competition, but rather of a different mix of contestability, availability, decidability and vulnerability, without being able to incorporate them into the single dimension of competition. The level of actual competition in any given setting is a point moving in a four dimensional space where no equilibrium can be found as the maximisation of one dimension comes at the expense of the others. It is necessary to abandon the analysis of an optimised system and to concentrate on the study of which alternative decisions are available and valid in practice. If all possible maximisation present weakness, unintended or contradictory results, then all reference to full information, to vote maximisation, to perfect vulnerability etc., are irrelevant from the operative point of view. It is better to concentrate on configurations that pass the test of feasibility. And

a different mix of each dimension can be evaluated only via choices motivated in each historical circumstance by the most needed values sought. We end up where we started: what form of competition and how much competition bring us back to the definition of the 'social value' that needs to be maximised in any given case.

Competition is not a defining characteristic of democracy but a property of which there can be more or less. However, it is not a uni-dimensional phenomenon which can be studied 'under optimal conditions'. If competition has to perform producing valuable (to third part) unintended effects of political interaction, it must remain within relatively narrow boundaries. Those conditions which in an optimal model perspective limit and contain competition, at the same time sustain it and make it viable. The set of normative factors, of social bonds, and of legal and institutional provisions <sup>66</sup> which shape group loyalties and identifications, which determine a certain amount of collusive practices and which prevent an outright competitive logic to prevail,

limiting both its scope and means, do not represent elements of 'imperfection', but conditions of viability. Obviously the factors which contain competition can be so powerful, encompassing and tight that the restraint on competition can suppress it altogether. At the same time, these confining conditions can be so weak that they do not have the capacity to contain competition, whose effects in different domains of political life can be detrimental to the same beneficial effects competition is thought to produce. Political competition needs constraining-sustaining conditions as it is unlikely to be effective in a world of rational, maximising, selfish independent actors as much as it is in a world of communal closed groups.





## Notes

<sup>1</sup> G. Simmel, *Conflict and The Web of Group Affiliation*, New York, The Free Press, 1955 (or. ed. 1908 and 1922), in particular pp. 58-85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58. If the prize is firmly in the hand of one adversary, and it needs be directly subtracted to him, then other less institutionalised forms of conflict prevail.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60

<sup>4</sup> This conception leads Simmel to criticise the socialist ideology of his time. The recognition of the purely technical character of these techniques (competition, socialism, glid) should force socialist ideologies and organisations to relinquish their claim to being a self-justifying aim and an ultimate value. They should rather argue calculating and appraising themselves in comparison with individualistic competition, in so far as it too is a mean to super-individual ends attainment. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Although differences exist in the definition of this power: votes, offices, influence on policy.

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1954 (4th ed.); A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper & Row, 1957.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow this term from A. Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension. Toward a New Economics*, New York, Free Press, 1988, in particular Ch. 12: *Encapsulated Competition*.

<sup>8</sup> J. A. Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> A. Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 19, footnote n. 11.

<sup>12</sup> B. Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> A. Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 107 and ff.

<sup>14</sup> J. A. Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 269 and p. 282 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> An exhaustive review may identify different social values regarded as by-products of competition. For instance, a number of authors of economic formation define such unintended result as the 'elimination of unnecessary returns to party leaders and functionaries', where unnecessary returns are seemingly defined in terms of spoils. See G. J. Stigler, 'Economic Competition and Political Competition', *Public Choice*, 13 (1972), pp. 91-106. However, the only condition regarded as indispensable to avoid unnecessary returns is contestability. So it is not necessary to discuss this position, already implicit in the Schumpeterian vision.

<sup>16</sup> The most obvious example being equal or universal suffrage.

<sup>17</sup> For the discussion of the conditions of democracy see R. Dahl, *Poliarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971, p. 3 and ff. Note that he lists among them the right to compete for electoral support, but he does not go so far as to include political competition as such.

<sup>18</sup> G. Sartori, 'Democrazia competitiva ed élites politiche', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 7 (1977), p. 350.

<sup>19</sup> C. J. Friedrich, *Man and his Government*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1963

<sup>20</sup> This is the term used and discussed in S. Bartolini and P. Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> In a short discussion of the concept of competition K. Strom has mentioned three 'models' of party competition, labelling them 'contestability', 'conflict of interest' and 'performance sensitivity'; 'Interparty Competition in Advanced Democracies', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1 (1989), pp. 280-281. The definition of his first 'models' roughly corresponds to what I will discuss under the same label. The second does not correspond to any of my conditions. The third mixes aspects that I will discuss separately under the label of availability and decidability.

<sup>22</sup> R. D'Alimonte, 'Democrazia e competizione', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 19 (1989), pp. 301-319, in particular p. 301, p. 302 and p. 303.

<sup>23</sup> G. J. Stigler, 'Perfect Competition, Historically Contemplated', *The Journal of Political Economy*, 65 (1957), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> The concept, although formulated much before, did not begin to receive explicit and systematic attention in the main stream of economics until the beginning of the 1870's; G. J. Stigler, 'Perfect Competition Historically Contemplated', *cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> G. J. Stigler, *Competition*, in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, New York, MacMillan & The Free Press, 1968, vol. 3, pp. 181-82.

<sup>26</sup> J. K. Clark, 'Toward a Concept of Workable Competition', *American Economic Review*, 30 (1940) pp. 241-256.

<sup>27</sup> Ideology is introduced in a second stage, to reduce the implicit huge information costs.

<sup>28</sup> By 'sensitivity' is normally meant 'issue sensitivity'. Against this term three basic criticism were advanced:

a) according to the findings of the early American public opinion studies, issue voting is not separated from party voting. See A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, W. E. Miller and D. E. Stokes, *The American Voter: An Abridgement*, New York, Wiley, 1964, p. 78;

b) the term issue-sensitive is not correct because anyway there are inconsistencies in the presentation of issues (i.e. it is not easy to know where parties-candidates stand on each issues; very often ambiguous and confused stances). So an issue-sensitive voter could not make-up his mind. See D. Robertson, *A Theory of Party Competition*, London, Wiley, 1976, p. 13 for a list of such inconsistencies in party messages and stances;

c) issue voting in inherently multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to a uni-dimensional space. So spatial models work poorly with respect to issues and issue-voting. See G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 330-333, who prefers to speak of party images as condensed issue-packages.

In the context of this argument, my definition of the available voter does not make reference to the origins of this availability, to how the available voter makes up his mind, and to whether his/her position can be represented in spatial terms.

<sup>29</sup> On these measures see S. Bartolini, 'La volatilità elettorale', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 16 (1986), pp. 363-400; and S. Bartolini and P. Mair, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-37.

<sup>30</sup> For a review of individual level volatility studies based on the transition matrices technique see D. Denver, *Conclusion*, in I. Crewe and D. Denver (ed.), *Electoral Change in Western Democracies; A Framework for Analysis*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, pp. 400-412.

<sup>31</sup> C. van der Eljk and E. V. Oppenhuis, 'European Parties' Performance in Electoral Competition', *European Journal of Political Research*, 19 (1991), pp. 55-80.



<sup>32</sup> A. Downs, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>33</sup> 'A Theory of the Calculus of Voting', *American Political Science Review*, 62 (1968), pp. 25-43 and *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1973. They formalise this calculus in the following equation:

$$R = PB - C,$$

where

R = the expected net utility of voting less the utility of abstaining;

P = the probability of affecting the outcome;

B = the differential benefits over outcomes (the party differential);

C = the cost of voting.

<sup>34</sup> M. Laver and W. B. Hunt, *Policy and Party Competition*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 3. I will make reference to this work that discusses and summarises the position of rational choice theory on the issue.

How this postulate is essential to formal modelling is stated several times in the book. A number of critical notes concerning the postulate of exogenous preferences are in P. Dunleavy and H. Ward, 'Exogenous Voter Preferences and Parties with State Power: Some Internal Problems of Economic Theories of Party Competition', *British Journal of Political Science*, 11 (1981), pp. 352-363. Also relevant for the debate about preference shaping or preference adapting competition is P. Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, 112-144.

<sup>35</sup> Laver and Hunt

make the hypothesis that the structure of preference in the electorate could be shaped by party competition itself. But this is a rather scholastic and rapidly discarded hypothesis:

'If the aims of the theorist are relatively modest, relating to patterns observed at a particular election or to a short sequence of elections, then the structure of electoral preference may be taken as given' (*ibid.*, p. 10). They add that this assumption 'may seem on the face of it to be a relatively non controversial approach to take, though it seems so mainly because such matters have largely been ignored by both pure theorists and empirical researchers' (*ibid.*, p. 11). Therefore, the choice is a matter of 'faith' and they 'make no bones about putting our faith in the assumption that tastes are exogenous to party competition' (*ibid.*, p. 3).

<sup>36</sup> It can be conceived as an heuristic simplification. If the current structure of electoral preferences was shaped by past party activities, there are good reasons to believe that the future structures will be determined by current party activities. Even in presence of a stable short term structure, one can work for the bringing about of a different one. A party may find itself cut off from chances of victory given the existing structure of preferences of the electorate, but it is not necessarily compelled to adapt itself to this structure. Given that what it does may determine future changes in the voters' preferences, party competition is not only an adaptive effort.

<sup>37</sup> Downs too assumes preferences of voters as being intrinsic, that is shaped by some force which is both prior and independent from party competition. However in a small passage he states: 'though parties will move ideologically to adjust to the distribution, under some circumstances, they will also attempt to move voters toward their own location, then altering it' [the distribution], *op. cit.*, p. 140. This remark is not developed in the work because it implied a revision of the whole model, entirely anchored on the solid rock of the distribution of voters' preferences. Downs' successors have more explicitly assumed that party competition does not affect the distribution of preferences.

<sup>39</sup> See the notes by Simmel, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-76, who discusses the cases of corporations.

<sup>40</sup> Two 'pure' example of the consequences in different arenas of party choices about the decidability of the electoral offer are represented by the Dutch Socialists strategy in the 1977 elections and the Italian Lega in the 1994 elections. The first made their positions far more decidable, opting for an adversarial strategy, with the result of winning the electorate but losing the government. The second, in blurring their profile in a large alliance may have won the government but lost the electorate.

<sup>41</sup> A clear presentation of the linkages between the different arenas of the party system is in M. Laver, 'Party Competition and Party System Change. The Interaction of Coalition Bargaining and Electoral Competition', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1 (1989), 301-324, esp. pp. 302-305.

<sup>42</sup> D. E Stokes, *Spatial Models of Party Competition*, in A. Campbell *et al.*, *Elections and the Political Order*, New York, John Wiley, 1966, pp. 61-179, in particular pp. 170-173. Valence issue can be defined as non-dimensional issues, that is issues which can not help to order preferences in spatial terms.

<sup>43</sup> Budge and Farlie present an alternative view of issues. The classic argument of having parties located at, say, 30% versus 60% welfare spending assumes that both parties take stands on the 'same' issue.

They have argued that parties may try to compete by manipulating the salience of different issue dimensions. That is, giving prominence and emphasis to those issues on which they are strong and which are more favourable to them and, at the same time, downplaying those on which they feel weaker.

If parties do so, it may result that instead of talking about the same problems, they talk about different problems and what decides the election is the preference of electors for a type of issues 'owned' by a type of party. See I. Budge and D. Farlie, *Explaining and Predicting Elections: Issues, Effects and Party Strategies in Twenty-three Democracies*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1983, pp. 152-155.

<sup>44</sup> W. Schneider, *Styles of Competition*, in R. Rose (ed.), *Electoral Participation, A Comparative Analysis*, London, Sage, 1980, pp. 91-97. The centrality of 'divisiveness' was underlined also in an earlier paper: 'Issues, Voting, and Cleavages: A Methodology and Some Tests', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 18 (1974), pp. 111-146.

<sup>45</sup> W. Schneider, *Styles of Competition, cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>47</sup> The extreme case of the devolution of political issues to forces controlling resources for implementation is when they are left to the market forces.

<sup>48</sup> An interesting open question is whether these negotiated order impose themselves in situation of ineffective politico-electoral competition or do they determine the enfeeblement of such competition. When existing, such orders reduce the scope of electoral policy competition as policy is decided elsewhere. At the same time, they also require as a prerequisite such reduction of the scope of electoral competition. Actually the dynamics of electoral competition should normally represent a mechanism of instability for such negotiated orders. Actors aiming at the electoral conquest of office could challenge such orders, reserving for themselves the right to accept or refuse them in view of their electoral goals.

<sup>49</sup> Attention to this point, with particular reference to the development in party organisation, is given in R. Katz and P. Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1 (1995), forthcoming.





# **EUI WORKING PAPERS**

## **IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

EUI Working Paper SPS No. 95/6

### **Electoral Competition: Analytical Dimensions and Empirical Problems**

STEFANO BARTOLINI

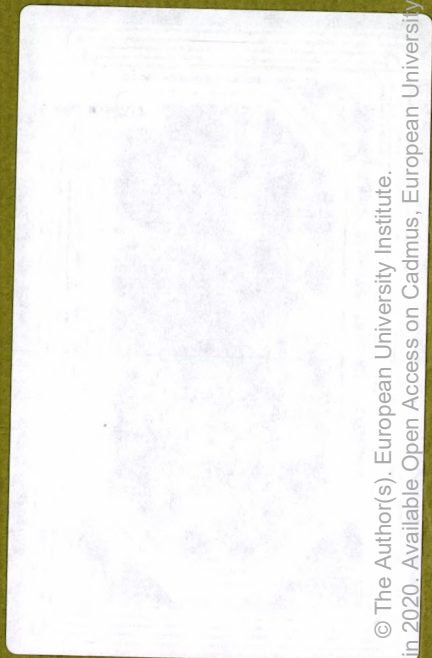
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**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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**STEFANO BARTOLINI**

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The term 'electoral' or 'party competition' is utilised either as a loose term for the entire cycle of electoral, parliamentary and governmental politics, or in the context of the formal modelling of party strategies and voting choices within the narrow limits of assumptions about actors' motives, preferences, and information, or in descriptive accounts of particular election campaigns, party platforms and statements, etc. The use of the term 'competition' in titles of papers, the discussion of the concept itself and its measurement have grown in political science literature since W.W.II. Still the concept remains vague and ambiguous. Its exact theoretical meaning and the kind of empirical phenomena that are indicated by it are unclear for two reasons.

Firstly, too much is borrowed from the economic theory of competition. The assumed fundamental analogy, similarity or resemblance between economic and political competition is erroneous. Competition in politics is altered by the degree of collusion that is inherent in the achievement of the exclusive good of public authority. And the difference is not only one

of degree. Secondly, like economists, political scientists, tend to view competition as a unidimensional phenomenon; as a single property of which there can be more or less and whose upper limit is a model of 'perfect' competition. On the contrary, however, the conditions of competition in politics are manifold. Moreover, they neither covary, nor do their maximisation point or reach 'perfection'.

This paper argues these points taking the lead from the unintended 'social value' which is the by-product of competition in politics. This value is taken as the yardstick for discussing the conditions that need to be met in order for competition to produce it. The paper analyses these conditions, claiming that their parallel maximisation is impossible. The debate about political competition must concern the different dimensions and conditions of competition a society wants to maximise in specific historical situations.

### **The unintended 'social value' of competition**

From the early, almost implicit, appraisal of the beneficial effect of trade competition by Adam Smith

competition has achieved a generalised and explicit recognition as an adequate and valuable technique for the satisfaction of almost any need and the attainment of almost any value in almost any sphere of human activity. The exceptional value attributed to the parallel efforts by several parties to obtain the same prize is surprising when one considers the number of fields in which the principle of subordination of individual efforts to the collective goal is still prevalent and legitimised: both private and public bureaucracies, productive processes, family circles and kinship groups. Yet, the 'ideological' trend nowadays prizes competition as the default and prevalent mode. Other principles or techniques of individual forces co-ordination need *ad hoc* justification and legitimation and are reserved to fields where competition is regarded as unattainable or not yet attainable. Whether the satisfaction of human needs and desires and the creation of values is to be left to the competition of individual forces or to their co-ordination in view of a collectively defined goal, is no longer a debated political issue.



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The social legitimacy of competition rests on a point: the net result of competition among individuals for the same prize produce an overall result which is advantageous to a 'third part'. The third gaining part can be identified in individualistic premises as well as in functionalist or systemic ones. In the first perspective, the third gaining part is a collective welfare function maximising each individual function. In the second perspective the advantage is the realisation of some overall value which is positive from the systemic point of view. Georg Simmel has analysed the sociological mechanism of this transformation of individual impulses into socially valuable results<sup>1</sup>. From the formal point of view competition rests on an individualistic principle; the refusal of the subordination of every individual interest and effort to a uniform supra-individual (or group) interest. Competition assumes that each competitor pursues his/her interest, utilising his/her energies according to such interest, and evaluates the results in terms of objective accomplishments. In the form of 'pure' competition, unlike other forms of conflictual interactions, the prize is at stake; it is

not in the hands of either adversary. In 'pure' competition 'each competitor by himself aims at the goal, without using its strength on the adversary... from a superficial standpoint, it proceeds as if there existed no adversary, but only the aim' <sup>2</sup>.

Competition presupposes, therefore, the existence of a common aim, of an objective value desired by all competing parties: be it profit, glory, scientific prestige or power. However, the social legitimization element of competition is that the subjective antagonistic efforts that lead to the realisation of the objective value desired by the competitors, determine as a by-product the realisation of other values outside it. The final result of those antagonistic efforts transform them into an ultimate goal, while from the point of view of the individual competitor, this ultimate goal is neither wanted nor aimed at. In this mechanism lies the value of competition for the social circle of which the competitors are members. 'From the standpoint of the society [competition] offers subjective motives as the means of producing objective social values: and from

the standpoint of the competing parties, it uses the production of objective values as means for attaining subjective satisfaction' <sup>3</sup>. Thus, competition is legitimised from the collective point of view through its capacity to overcome, and indeed deny, the tension between subjective and collective goals. The latter are satisfied by the objective results of competition as opposed to the subjective goals of competitors.

Although resting on the individualistic principle of non subordination of subjective goals, competition finds its legitimation in the fulfilment of socially desirable ends. The latter justifies the losses incurred by individuals in the process. In this sense, individualistic competition should not be seen as opposed to the exclusivity or predominance of the 'social interest', but rather to other 'techniques' for the attainment of the same social interest. The relationship between competition and individualism is not complete without the legitimising reference to the social interest. The legitimation of individualistic competition is equally as social as the legitimation



of competing 'techniques' for the co-ordination of individual efforts to achieve collective goals <sup>4</sup>.

### **Schumpeter, Downs and the 'social value' of political competition**

This conception of the valuable by-product of competition has been extended to politics relatively later than in other fields. The objective value prized by antagonistic individuals and groups in the political sphere is usually identified with political power <sup>5</sup>. The socially valuable by-product of this antagonistic struggle for power is, however, less clearly defined.

A short answer is that competition produces as by-product democracy. The answer is inadequate. Competition presupposes the existence of sets of norms and rules which offer at least a minimal regulatory framework without which it can well degenerate into utter unregulated conflict. Democracy as a set of basic rights and of respected procedures is a necessary condition for political and electoral competition to take place, rather than the other way

round. Pluralism, which is a necessary condition of democracy, need not be 'competitive'. Other principles may and do regulate the interaction among a plurality of actors. Whether politico-electoral competition has a feedback effect in maintaining, defending, stabilising or otherwise improving the basic constitutional capsule of democracy and/or its pluralism is another matter, but it does not change the logical priority of the latter with respect to the former.

With their influential works Schumpeter and Downs<sup>6</sup> are the forerunners of the 'third gaining part axiom' of competition in the political realm. Their work is well known and there is no need to recast it here except for a few points and general implications of their approach. Schumpeter's innovation is to render irrelevant all motivations of political elites with the exception of their shared appetite for power. Once channelled within a 'social capsule'<sup>7</sup> of norms and procedures defining appropriate and acceptable means, these appetites tend to produce social values which are of great interest for third parts and for the

entire society. There is no need to assume that those social values are consciously aimed at by parties in the competitive struggle. This notion presented several advantages. It saved the normative character of democracy by attributing to voters the role of *ultimate instance of selection* of their rulers. At the descriptive level, it enabled the renunciation of the unrealistic degree of political competence, initiative and altruism required by other theories of democracy that Schumpeter labelled 'classic'. It facilitated the unambiguous distinction between democratic and non democratic systems, through the exclusivity of the popular sanction of government by elections. Finally, it helped to rephrase the dilemma of 'classic theories' concerning the democracy-authority relationship . It avoided that the Leviathan, once legitimised by a social contract, be free to operate for the common good.

Schumpeter makes a close link between competition and democracy. His definition of democracy is 'government approved by people' and the democratic system is defined by the formal rules set up for the exercise of



a free, fair and loyal electoral competition. The democratic method is only 'the institutional instrument to arrive at political decisions on the bases of which single individuals obtain the power to decide through a competition which has as object the popular vote' <sup>8</sup>. The procedures which constitute democracy are the constitutional aspect of politico-electoral competition; the social capsule of competition. Actually, his theory is more a theory of democracy than one of competition. His procedural definition makes competition essential to democracy; a defining characteristic of democracy.

Yet Schumpeter does not say much about competition itself. He acknowledges that 'our theory it is of course no more definite than it is the concept of competition for leadership' <sup>9</sup>. Neither does he formally define the socially desirable by-product of politico-electoral competition. The by-product seems to be the peaceful selection of the ruling elites; their submission at fixed intervals to the renewal of the mandate; in short, the institutionalisation of the never ending fight for power. He argues that

between the ideal case of perfect competition, which does not exist, and the real cases in which any electoral contestation of the ruling elite is prevented by force, a whole series of variations exists. Within this range, the democratic method of government fades by 'imperceptible steps' into the authoritarian method <sup>10</sup>. However, he does not specify what makes for this variation. Competition, therefore, is essentially conceived as electoral 'contestability', that is, as openness of the electoral race to challengers. Schumpeter's explicit affirmation concerning the unintended (by the actors) 'social value' of politico-electoral competition stops here: the repeated selection process of the leadership and to its approval by the people.

Downs pushes further Schumpeter's thesis and builds on it explicitly recognising the inspiration <sup>11</sup>. Competition 'is a mechanism whereby political parties which are engaged in what Schumpeter called a 'competitive struggle for the people's vote' are obliged to take account of the preference of the electors for one policy rather than another...' <sup>12</sup>.

12  
The unintended social value of competition is  
'responsiveness'. One does not need to assume that  
candidates and parties want to respond to voters  
preferences. They are involuntarily forced to do so  
while pursuing their goals of power by maximising the  
necessary vote. Competition obliges elites to take  
into account the preferences of voters. The thesis is  
about how competition compel the transformation of  
each party's motives into the social value of each  
party's honesty, responsibility and responsiveness to  
electors' desires <sup>13</sup>.

This difference between Schumpeter and Downs is not a  
minor one. Downs' model reaches this conclusion on the  
basis of well known assumptions. His voter is  
rational actor whose choice depends on the comparative  
evaluation of the advantages he/she expects from the  
governmental performance of different parties. He/she  
will offer his/her vote to the party which proposes  
that set of public policies which comparatively offers  
the highest return in terms of well-being as  
subjectively evaluated by the voter. Similarly, the  
parties/candidates offer to the electorate that set of



policies which they perceive will maximise their votes. In the pages where Schumpeter develops his concept of competitive struggle for votes, references to responsiveness are absent. Schumpeter does not say that voters know what they want and are able to evaluate what it is done. Consequently, he does not dare to conclude that elites will give them what they want. The kind of policies that are offered does not concern him very much. On the contrary, one can find in the text several statements that underline the crucial importance of the selection process: ' .. [we] ...make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding'; 'Its choice [of the voter] does not flow from his initiative, but is being turn shaped, and the shaping is an essential part of the democratic process'; 'Voters confine themselves to accepting this bid in preference to others or refusing to accept it'<sup>14</sup>. One could probably say that Schumpeter's vision was that of a sceptical European conservative observer.

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With Downs, on the contrary the concept of 'responsiveness' to the voter preferences is the essence of the unintended social value of electoral competition. Both what it is offered by parties/candidates and the actual basis on which the voters judge are not only relevant, but essential to the achievement of the unintended social result of competition. While for Schumpeter 'procedural democracy', which is authenticated in fair electoral competition, offers goods that are independent from the substantive preferences of the voters and the substantive offers of the parties, Downs holds that through competition, procedural democracy transforms itself *ipso facto* into the only possible substantial democracy; a democracy which responds to voter preferences. Schumpeter's goals could be achieved even in the face of 'irrational', uninformed or even foolish or random voting. For Downs, these kind of voters do not force elites to involuntarily respond. Schumpeter's version of the competitive struggle for the vote is even compatible with a strong elitist vision whereby voter perceptions and preferences are shaped, informed, oriented or otherwise manipulated by

elites. Downs' version is not. Schumpeter emphasises the periodic submission of elites to an otherwise unspecified voter judgement. Downs stresses the capacity of elites to respond readily and sympathetically to demands. Thus, government 'approved by' the people it is not to the same thing as government 'responsive to' the people.

An objection to this emphasis on the different unintended social value of competition in Schumpeter and Downs is that the latter only brought to the logical final consequence a line of reasoning already implicit in Schumpeter's premises. However, there is sufficient evidence in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* to demonstrate Schumpeter's mistrust of any substantive link between what people want and what elites offer in the form of a typical dyadic exchange. He was simply unwilling to accept the idea.

### **The conditions of competition**

The definition of the unintended social value achieved through the 'technique' of individual competition applied to politics is important <sup>15</sup>.



Different 'social values' imply different conditions of attainment. If the value is the periodic accountability of governing elites, this can be guaranteed by procedural rules governing the holding of periodic elections and the possibility for several political actors to contest them. The only necessary condition to this end is **contestability**, that is the actual possibility for different political leaders and groups to contest free and fair elections. Unquestionably contestability is a condition of competition, but at the same time, contestability is also a basic defining characteristic of democracy; the one which makes political pluralism possible. Contestability, therefore, is the point where democracy and competition overlap. There are however other often cited conditions of democracy which are not necessary conditions of competition <sup>16</sup>. At the same time, there are other conditions of competition which need not to be regarded as conditions of democracy <sup>17</sup>.

In brief, I will argue that there are three other necessary conditions of competition to consider in addition to the one that I have just discussed.

responsiveness is the goal aimed at. They can be identified working backward from responsiveness. What is the key to responsiveness in competitive races? Excluding as irrelevant individual motivations, the standard argument is that leaders in striving to keep or acquire power and office will be constantly worried about how voters are going to react to their actions. This worry is necessarily a function of the extent to which the leader is him/herself exposed to a reasonable threat of electoral sanction. Only if he/she will is worried about the reactions of voters will he/she be 'constantly piloted by the anticipation of those reactions' <sup>18</sup>. Responsiveness is achieved by introducing Friedrich's mechanism of anticipated reactions <sup>19</sup>. It follows that a key condition of competition is the electoral **vulnerability** of incumbents.

In turn, what are the necessary condition of incumbents' vulnerability? The condition is that voters are willing to punish and reward; that is, they are available to modify their electoral choice. If they are not, incumbents are safe and vulnerability is

unthinkable. One does not need to postulate full elasticity of the vote, but some predisposition to electoral switch must be present if vulnerability is to be conceivable. The quota that is necessary, that is to say, the type and number of voters, is impossible to say at this stage. What matters is that such electoral availability will change from one context to another and in time. Therefore this condition will be called electoral **availability** <sup>20</sup>.

If responsiveness depends on vulnerability, and the latter requires voters' availability, what motivates the available voter to act for or against the incumbent government? This must be the differentiation of the offer and the consequent perception of different potential outcomes. Whatever parties/candidates offer (programmes, policies, ideologies, images, etc.) it must be different and clearly 'spelled out' for the voters, in order to make vulnerability not just the chance outcome of random change in voting habits. The anticipated reactions of both government and opposition parties (which are supposed to be the key to responsiveness) must relate



to voters' responses to differentiated and clear offers. The latter enable the voter to decide whether to change his/her electoral preference, and also make intelligible to the elites the reactions of the voters. If products are not differentiated (or their difference is not perceived), voters can punish or reward but no responsiveness will be achieved. I have argued that this is not a problem in a Schumpeterian perspective, where the approval of rulers is the essential aspect and ultimate goal. But it is crucial to the Downsian responsiveness perspective. Offers must therefore be decidable by voters in order to make the entire process intelligible to both voters and elites alike. I will call this condition the **decidability** of the offer <sup>21</sup>.

The argument thus far, has been the following. If 1) we admit that electoral competition is legitimised by a by-product valuable to third-part; if 2) we go beyond Shumpeter's minimal goal and accept responsiveness as the yardstick of competition performance; then 3) the conditions necessary to this end are:

- 1) electoral contestability
- 2) electoral availability
- 3) electoral decidability
- 4) electoral vulnerability

In the subsequent sections each of these conditions will be discussed in more detail.

### **Contestability**

Contestability is a necessary condition of both democracy and competition. Conceptually, this overlap is ill-starred. It generates a great deal of confusion with the result that sometimes competition is equated with democracy and vice versa. In one of the few articles explicitly devoted to this topic, Roberto D'Alimonte has argued the case for an orderly distinction between the two processes insisting that 'democracy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of competition' and that 'competition is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of democracy'. The logical corollary is that there can be democracy without competition, but not competition without democracy. Competition does not derive solely from democracy, and democracy is not the product of

competition. D'Alimonte argues that the condition of freedom for parties to present candidates and programmes and the condition of freedom for electors to chose them 'identify democracy not with competition, but with an open politico-electoral market in which the freedom of access is guaranteed both on the demand side (the electors) and on the supply side (the parties)' <sup>22</sup>. Logically therefore, if the politico-electoral market is open, it need not necessarily be competitive. The conditions of democracy are not the conditions of competition.

In other words, D'Alimonte clearly separates democracy and competition making contestability a property that defines an open electoral market (that is democracy), not a competitive market (that is competition). However, this line of thinking entails a significant drawback. Considering contestability as a property of democracy, means that all democracies should present this feature. Hence, the possibility of regarding different democracies as having dissimilar degrees of contestability is curtailed. If democracies are open electoral markets, do they all have the same



degree of openness? Primarily, the answer is no. I want to keep, within the general concept of competition, a dimension which indicates exactly the extent of openness to contestation of the electoral and political race. There are different political systems or circumstances whose democratic nature is undeniable, but which offer to new and old claimants very different opportunities for electoral contestation .

The usual association of condition of free entry with the idea of the market, and the frequent use of the term 'political' or 'electoral market' is somewhat equivocal. If we take seriously the economic terminology, the market is defined as an institution for the consumption of transactions. A market best performs this function when every buyer who is willing to pay more than the minimum realised price for any class of commodity succeeds in buying the commodity, and every seller who is willing to sell at lower price than the minimum realised price succeeds in selling the commodity . In other words, a market exist when those who are willing to pay more find the appropriate

good, and those who are willing to charge less find the appropriate buyer. A market it is not defined by ease of entry, but by the 'obtainability' of transactions. In this sense a political market condenses both electoral contestability and electoral availability. It is questionable whether this concept is of any use in politics. We should we ready to profoundly revise our categories. For instance, abstentionism becomes the most obvious sign of market failure; the existence of voters unable to find the desired good. At the same time, an electoral market exists when parties offer the same policy package at lower prices (taxation?), and when voters intensely motivated by a particular policy obtain it by 'paying more' (voting twice or what else?).

A further shortcoming in the concept of the 'electoral market' when associated with that of the economic market, is that market and competition are not only different things; they can have little to do with each other. A market can perform efficiently as an institution for the consumption of transactions and still be monopolistic or very non competitive On the

other hand, the market can be highly imperfect in its performance and competitive at the same time <sup>23</sup>. When contestability is analysed in connection with political competition, the key operative issue is: given certain conditions how many actors do we need or can we afford to make competition lively and viable? The economic theory of competition in more than a century of reflection <sup>24</sup>, has given no definite, straightforward answer to the question of how many firms are necessary to make a market competitive, and of what maximum share of the market control by one firm is compatible with competition. The solution offered is the definition of the conditions of 'perfect competition', refined over time. However, to say that there must be numerous traders on both sides of the market does not identify the minimal number necessary to define a competitive market. Moreover, the indicators usually utilised to empirically evaluate the degree of competition are extraordinarily ambiguous. Two examples: concentration ratios are used, arguing that the lower the concentration the more competitive the market, but again the minimum concentration compatible with the definition of



competition is not determined; price homogeneity is often regarded as an indicator of competition (the more prices are homogeneous the more perfect the competition), but the same indicator is often considered by Courts as a phenomenon more suggestive of collusion than of competition <sup>25</sup>. Indeed the high abstraction of the concept of perfect competition and its difficult operationalisation have pushed economists to look for a more realistic and 'workable' concept of competition <sup>26</sup>.

In conclusion, although economists tend to equate competition with openness of the market, they do not offer a useful solution to the problem of contestability in politics. The fact of the matter is that the question of entry is far more important in politics than in economics. It is somewhat paradoxical that economic metaphors are employed to conceptualise it. In politics, one can easily define in terms of contestability the point where competition ends and it is substituted by something else. At the other end of the spectrum, we know that a high fragmentation of the offer is not likely to enhance 'perfect competition'

but rather political chaos. Authority being a public good, success in the competition race offers authority not just over one's own supporters, but over all members of the polity. The indivisible nature of authority leads to strong pushes toward oligarchic tendencies and determines large economies of scale. Competition for private goods allows everyone to deal with the preferred partner, even though this partner is a very minor one. In politics, there is room for only a limited number of parties. New entries are immensely more difficult than in business. It is difficult to carve out a small niche in politics. Besides, small niches may be of very little use. Finally oligarchic tendencies and economies of scale are also fostered by the protection against foreign or international competition which is typical, thus far, of political competition.

This can make the comparative empirical study of political contestability possible and even easier than in economics. Our question should not be what is the 'perfect' but rather what is the 'viable' level of contestability. Several of the factors influencing the

structure of opportunity to contest are institutional and linked to variables like the electoral formula, the requirements for candidature of individuals and lists, the threshold for access to public finance and media coverage, the cost of campaigning in different circumstances, but also to several other factors not strictly institutional. It is therefore better 1) to keep contestability as an important dimension of competition. As will be clear later, the level of contestability impinges upon other conditions of competition; 2) to keep contestability clearly separate from electorate availability, thus avoiding to condensate both of them in the 'open market' metaphor; 3) to consider contestability as a structure of political opportunity; and 4) to concentrate on the empirical factors which may impinge upon the variations in this structure of opportunities for new and old potential claimants.

### **Availability**

In Downs, the rational orientation toward the policies or policy packages offered by parties makes the voter a perfect elastic consumer, who is, by definition,



available to change partisan preference should a better offer be made to him <sup>27</sup>. For electoral competition it is essential that at least a quota of the electorate be available to such change. Such a quota represents what is at stake in the rivalry; the prize of the parallel efforts by competitors; therefore, the incentive for party competition. Without available voters, it is unlikely that parties would be willing to engage in policy competition.

We do not have precise information about the quota of available electorate necessary to make an electoral contest competitive or more competitive than another. The literature on electoral behaviour has accumulated a vast amount of material that indicates the extent to which individual voters and electorates are, in fact, little inclined to respond to changes of the offer with changes in party choice. Strong psychological identifications, resulting from organisational encapsulation, cultural bonds, and the like make important quotas of the national electorates unavailable for voting switches. Thus, the actual level of electoral availability in each given election

or country is an empirical aspect of crucial importance for the study of electoral competition. It is probably true that electoral behaviour studies have not paid sufficient attention to the topic of electoral availability in relation to the issue of the competitive nature of elections. We may simply assume that, *ceteris paribus*, the higher the level of potential availability, the higher the potential level of competition. However, the problem is complicated by the fact that the quantity of the available vote may be less important than its location.

At this juncture, it is important to underscore that the 'available voter' - defined as that voter who is willing to consider modifying his/her party choice - is not the same as the 'opinion voter', the 'informed voter' or, worse, the 'rational voter'. The 'available voter' it is not necessarily informed about issues or programmes, but is sensitive to them <sup>28</sup>. Sensitiveness neither entails strong information, nor capacity of judgement; it simply refers to the availability to be influenced when choosing, by elements which relate to public debate or personal

experience. A switcher can be highly uninformed and uninterested, as much as a strong identifier or a true believer can be politically competent and interested. What is certain, however, is that 1) identifiers have a lower propensity to switch than sensitive voters; 2) voters' sensitivity is higher a) the lower the number of cleavage lines activated or mobilised (segmentation); b) the less the organisational encapsulation of the electorate; c) the more diffuse the network of groups and the less interlocking is the link between specific political organisations (parties) and corporate groups outside the electoral domain; 3) parties, if compelled, look for switchers irrespective of who they are.

Aggregate measures of electoral volatility (party volatility as well as block of parties or system total volatility <sup>29</sup>) are used to characterise the volatility of different electorates at different points in time. Their importance should not be underestimated, notwithstanding their obvious limitations in the cancelling out of voting shifts of different signs which occur in the aggregation. For instance,

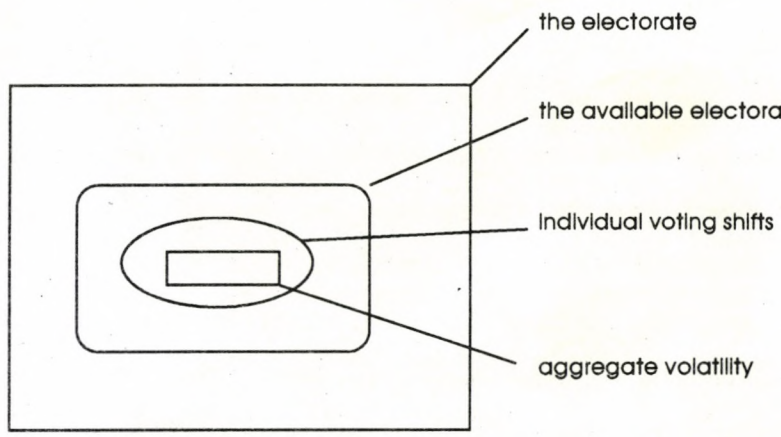


aggregate volatilities are by and large the only thing party leaders perceive of the potential electoral availability in their system. They are also the only certain element which enables them to ascertain the electorate's reactions to their strategic choices and moves. Individual level volatility has also been studied through transition matrices of voting switches giving a more precise estimation of the amount of electors who actually change their mind from one election to the next <sup>30</sup>. Unfortunately, these studies are not numerous and this kind of information is not collected routinely for elections. Moreover, their utilisation for the characterisation of the available electorate as the prize of the competitive efforts by the parties/candidates, is rare.

A further problem is that, whether aggregated or individual, these measures refer to actual voting shifts. But electoral availability is poorly measured by actual voting shifts. An elector can be 'at stake' in the sense of being available to change her/his partisan choice even if in the end he/she will record the vote for the same party as before. The amount of

actual voting changes underestimates electoral availability, as it records only those available electors who actually switched their preference, leaving aside those who did not. In the global electorate, aggregate volatility underestimates individual voting shifts, and the latter underestimate the actual electoral availability, as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Aggregate and Individual voting shifts and electoral availability



In a recent article, Eijk and Oppenhuis have suggested ways to operationalise electoral availability at the individual levels which are very promising as they are conceptualised in close relation to the issue of

electoral competition. They do not use the term availability or available electorate but they pick up this dimension with survey data in which people are asked about their willingness to vote for parties other than the one they prefer <sup>31</sup>. People are ranked according to the probability of voting for each of the parties in their party system. Voters range from those who are likely to vote for only one party to those who are likely to vote for several different parties. This method allows the differentiation of both different electorates and different sections of the same electorate, according to their electoral availability, although the authors tend to dichotomise their result in terms of electors 'beyond' competition and electors 'subject to intense competition' (pp. 60-61). Of great interest is their application of the data to individual parties. Through a number of operational choice, of no concern in this discussion, they compare the available vote for a party (those electors who declare it to be a possible choice) with the actual vote the party eventually gets at the polls. The term they use is 'competitive performance of political



parties' and it measures the relationship between the potential and the actual vote collected by the party.

The merit of this approach is not only that it suggests a direction to properly operationalise the dimension of electoral availability, but also that it relates this aspect to the patterns of electoral competition. Eijk and Oppenhuis tend to equate electoral availability with electoral competition, leaving aside what I consider to be other important condition of electoral competition. This is however, a minor point. They demonstrate that it is possible not only to properly conceptualise, but also to come to comparative inter-party and inter-system comparisons of electoral availability, seen as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of electoral competition.

### **Decidability**

Given the existence of electoral contestability and electoral availability, what happens if the parties do not want to compete? Are there conditions which push parties to limit or to avoid altogether the decidability of products offered? Although most of the

versions of the competitive theory of democracy and, in particular, formal models of party competition refer to the fact that parties offer programmes, policies, ideologies, images, issues or whatever else, not much is said about the decidability quality of these offers necessary to guarantee, improve, maximise or otherwise substantiate electoral competition. Is the quality of the offer so unimportant for electoral competition?

In formal models of voting choice an important role is given to what I define here as decidability. The net utility of the victory of the voter's preferred candidate's in Downs <sup>32</sup>, or the differential benefits of outcomes (the party differential), in W. H. Riker and P. C. Ordeshook's 'calculus of voting' <sup>33</sup> indicate how the voter perceives the difference it will make for her/him if party or candidate X or Y is elected. This obviously depends on product differentiation. If products are undifferentiated this term is zero and the probability of affecting the outcome (which I will discuss in the next section as vulnerability) becomes irrelevant. Ths, party

differentials count, but in formal models of competition they are reduced to party distances in a space either chosen as an example, or postulated or drawn from some data set.

For party competition to produce leadership responsiveness, the decidability of what is offered to voters is a necessary condition. The notion of choice is essential. Voters must perceive differences between parties/candidates in terms of emphasis, priority or performance in order to make a choice. Therefore whatever the party offers, it must be 1) different from what others offer and 2) clearly perceived by voters. Policy or issue position differentiation among parties, visibility and clarity of these differences for the voter are what I call here decidability.

There are several reasons why little attention is paid to the decidability of the offer in theories of competition. Firstly, the decidability of the offer it is not regarded as essential, as the emphasis is on the competitive selection of political personnel. I have already discussed this perspective dealing with



Schumpeter's position. Secondly, economic analysis from which political analogies are drawn, does not attribute much importance to this aspect. Quite the contrary, in a perfect competition model, goods should be as homogeneous as possible. The third and more important reason in my opinion, is that somehow the decidability of the offer is implicitly - not explicitly - postulated. The differentiation of products offered is assumed to result from other features of the competitive process.

Rational choice theorists consider voter' preferences as 'intrinsic', that is, as 'exogenous to the process of party competition' <sup>34</sup>. This means that voters have preferences which are independent from the offer made by politicians and parties. Obviously this is a crucial assumption, as one could well imagine that voter preferences are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the process of party competition and are in no way exogenous to it. Formal theorists, whether or not they discuss this issue, come to the conclusion that preferences are exogenous <sup>35</sup>. The second assumption about voters' preference in economic models

of political competition is that they are stable during the process of competition itself. Combining the endogenous versus exogenous shaping of voter preferences, with their stability or change during the process of electoral competition, one can draw the following scheme:

See Table 1 at page 86

Clearly, a structure of preferences that is endogenously produced throughout the process of competition can not be stable and therefore this type is impossible <sup>36</sup>. Of the remaining three types that normally postulated by economic models of competition is Type I. By definition, the structure of preference is exogenous, and, in the short run, such a structure is also stable. That is, it is not even affected by forces outside the competition process itself.

What form does party competition takes under these conditions? The only thing parties/candidates can do,

is acquire information about the stable and exogenously determined structure of preferences and try to adapt to it. They also need to engage in advertising campaigns, trying to inform the public of their stances. That is all. Party strategy is only an adaptive effort. Whatever complicating factors are added (activists attitudes, organisational features, etc.), will only make the achievement of this pre-defined adaptation more or less easy and efficient .

Type II is a variation of the theme. Keeping the exogenous formation of the structure of preferences, the simplification of the stable structure can be abandoned. Preferences can be modified even in the short term, but these modifications will be the result of factors external to party competition: cultural and value changes? Socio-structural modifications? Media coverage of events? It is not necessary to identify precisely the sources of change, but it is important to stress that in any case they are exogenous to the process of party competition. Parties, even in this



case are just adaptive machines. They either can or cannot see the changes and the potential gains or losses associated with them, but they can neither influence them, nor how voters perceive them. Electoral competition is ethero-directed.

I do not want to discuss the realism or the consequences of the assumption of the exogenous formation of preferences. What interests me is that in this static perspective, the decidability problem becomes marginal by definitional fiat. If they cannot shape preferences, parties must adapt to them. Their offers are meant to meet autonomously formed preferences. If the offer is, for instance, not very decidable - that is, undifferentiated and unclear party stands predominate - this can only be the result of preferences. If preferences can not be influenced what other strategy can parties adopt? How can they, for instance, collude if their collusion does not modify the preferences of voters? How can they follow an alternative strategy of maximum decidability? The only basis on which they can decide on one strategy rather than another is the shape of

the given preferences. Any other solution will only expose them to totally unproductive risks. Once the preferences are made unmodifiable, the offer becomes but a function of such preferences. In this sense, I believe that the assumption of the exogenous nature of preferences implicitly contributes to the rendering irrelevant of the problem of the decidability of the offer.

Let's consider the situation in Type III. The picture changes: the structure of electoral preferences is not exogenous to party competition but is influenced, if not determined, by it. Parties and politicians believe they can influence the preference of electors. This implies that they can do something other than adapt; to get the electors on their side <sup>37</sup>. Adaptation to the structure of preferences and modification of the structure of preferences interplay; begetting different mix of adaptation and modification, and debate about the degree of adaptation and modification.

The structure of electoral preferences is changing and these changes depend to a certain extent on what

parties and politicians do; depend on the offer. Party competition here is identified as the process through which parties and elites try to shape and modify to their advantage the structure of the electoral preferences. That is, exactly the contrary of what is postulated by rational choice theory. The way the electoral preferences are structured is not irrelevant to party competition, but is the object, essence and core of party competition itself. It is in the context of a 'preference shaping' type of competition that decidability becomes crucial.

Once decidability is regarded as a necessary condition for competition, deliberate strategies of increasing offer differentiation or of blurring party stances enter into empirical study. We must proceed from the recognition that political competition is built on a number of strong confining conditions of product differentiation. We can identify three processes of competition avoidance or restraint on the offer side:

- 1) those situations in which the very interest or purpose of the group of suppliers necessitates a



structure which strongly limits or even prohibits certain offers to be made;

2) those situations in which the interest and purpose of the suppliers are accessible to competition practices and competition as such is not limited, but the means through which it is pursued are more or less restricted;

3) those situations in which the interest and purpose of the suppliers are accessible to competition practices but competition is limited in its scope as a result of sheer collusion practices which supersede competition itself.

The first case concerns the socio-political capsule of competition. The set of norms, social practices and legal provisions which define the conditions of competition are normally protected from the basic principle of chance which operates in competition. The very interest and purpose of the group identify themes in which electoral competition, in terms of differentiated offers, is highly limited, as in the cases of symbols of national identity, unity,

solidarity, and more generally sets of formal and informal constitutional rules.

The second case is that of the restriction of the means through which competition obtains. The principle which supersedes competition is often that of the mechanical equality of the parts <sup>38</sup>. For instance equality of competitive means is often invoked and aimed at by agreement on sharing equal access to television broadcasting, equal attention in written media, proportional access to public resources for electoral competition, or ceilings of the total amount of resources candidates and parties can invest in political advertising. Even the proper style of campaigning and political advertising may be the object of inter-individual (that is voluntarily reached) or super-individual (imposed by law or morality standards) limitations. The interesting question is whether the restriction of certain competitive means actually affects the substance of policy and issue competition. Certain restrictions do not limit competition, but, on the contrary, they enhance true competition by freeing it from

unnecessary elements. Preventing the diversion of competition from diminishing the capacity of competitors, these restrictions can force competition to concentrate on the offer itself. It is therefore possible for competitors to establish agreements in a specific area of competition without weakening it in other areas. These inter-individual restrictions may grow to free competition from all those things which do not constitute competition, because in principle they can cancel each other out without effect. As shopkeepers can agree on fixed opening hours or sale periods, so political actors can agree on the muting or soft pedalling of certain means and techniques of competition. Yet, one should not forget that the means of competition consist, in some cases, of advantages offered to the third part, which may bear the brunt of the excessive restrictions on such means. These agreements can, in extreme cases, affect the very essence of competition, that is, to bring about forms of collusion and cartellisation that become plans for feeding the market according to a pre-established design.



This is in fact, the third form of restriction on competition which is the most important in this context. What is actually restricted is the **scope** of the offer in fields in principle accessible to political competition. The amount of forces and situations which lead to collusion and cartellisation practices among political competitors could scarcely be underestimated. First of all, politics is inherently collusive as a consequence of the exclusiveness of authority. The high threshold for access to authority requires a high degree of concentration of the market. The great deal of necessary coalition politics, is, in essence, cartellisation practice. In the processes of coalition making (electoral, parliamentary or governmental, policy positions, issues etc. are compromised, diluted or simply totally muted so as to obtain the economy of scale which is sought for. Coalition politics may indeed maximise other necessary conditions of competition (see below), but unquestionably they bring about a restriction on the scope of competition on the offer side.

The multiplicity of the sites of party interaction is a second incentive to collusion. Contrary to economic competition, political competition takes place in different and yet inter-linked sites or arenas. Parties compete in the electoral arena, but they then (as before) continue their interaction in other arenas like the legislative-parliamentary one and the governmental one. The same party may take different policy positions in the various arenas. Legislators group or regroup in different ways than they do at election time. The decidability of issues and policies may be voluntarily limited by the interplay of the electoral, legislative and governmental party systems. Opportunities to boost the salience of issues exploitable in the electoral arena, and which may concern sizeable sectors of public opinion, may not be taken up or may be dampened because they are damaging in other arenas; in light, for instance, of the potential consequences for the successive legislative bargaining. Possibilities in the legislative or governmental arena may be left unexplored because of the reluctance to expose oneself to the risk of an election that one is unwilling to fight on those

terms. It is possible to defeat an incumbent government with alliances and tactical moves which, however, may be detrimental in the electoral channel if obliged to fight an election in those terms <sup>39</sup>.

In other words, the necessary interplay between electoral competition and legislative bargaining may lead to the downplay of those issues regarded as favourable in one arena but possibly damaging in another

40 .

Finally, collusion and cartellisation may be achieved through co-ordinated manipulation of issue saliency. Analytically, they can be classified as follows:

- 1) blurred and unclear party position or party policy on certain issues;
- 2) slow transformation of certain problems from clear partisan to valence issue;
- 3) transfer of certain issue from the domain of politically legitimised decision making to domains where different criteria of legitimation prevail.



The discussion of these situations will require far more space than that available in this paper. I limit the argument to a few points. The transformation of divisive issues in valence issues is a process which weakens decidability. Position issues are 'those that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined. And ... 'valence' issues [are] those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate' <sup>41</sup>. Position issues are inherently divisive as they involve explicit for or against choices. Valence issues, on the contrary entail only one value (positive or negative) that is shared by the vast majority and they are essentially non-divisive <sup>42</sup>.

In an article devoted to the style of competition, Schneider proposes the following typology of issues which combines the clarity of the party stance dimension with that of the more or less divisive nature of issues <sup>43</sup>:

See Table 2 at page 87

The dimension of party choice, clear/non-clear concerns whether the voter perceives a difference between the parties on a particular problem. This dimension, which Schneider calls 'quality of choice' <sup>44</sup>, can be measured by voter ability to discriminate party positions and consequently, voter shifts correlated with issue positions. The 'divisiveness' dimension points to issues being defined more as position or more as valence. The two together refer to the decidability of the offer.

Since position issues are divisive, by definition the choice is offered. However, party positions can be blurred and unclear.

For 'valence issues' the question is more complex. A 'choice' in position terms is simply the anticipation that one solution is better than the other, and that, therefore, it makes sense to change or not to change.

In the case of valence issues, choice essentially comes down to the question of whether one party can do better than the other that which is defined as a matter of general and agreed concern. The choice of specific remedies and policies is less defined, being overshadowed by questions of 'competence'. When a general solution is desired by the vast majority, the specific remedy is less in the forefront than is the general perception of the non incumbents to do better than the incumbents. 'The failure of choice would be evidenced by the widespread perception that no alternative government will work. The decision to vote one way or the other could mean little in terms of anticipated performance' <sup>45</sup>.

From the point of view of what I regard as the decidability of the offer, divisive issues on which party stance is clear (partisan issues), are by far



the most decidable. Valence issues with a clear partisan orientation (election issue) may still be decidable. A valence issue is not divisive, but this does not imply that it is not controversial. Its salience, to whom is blame attributed, whether voters perceive a difference between parties in terms of priorities and performance, makes for its more or less controversial and debatable nature. The level of decidability seems to decline progressively when party stances are unclear and it is at its lowest when, at the same time, issues are not divisive. If parties can shape preferences through competition, they will tend to do so by defining issues as more or less divisive and by making their stances more or less well defined. That is by manipulating decidability.

Sheer removal of issue from the agenda is a more complicated but not infrequent solution. Issues and policy offer may be removed by 'constitutionalising' them or by referring them to other domains of legitimisation of decision making. By 'constitutionalisation', I mean the institutionalisation of goals which therefore tend to

be kept safely out of the policy domain regulated by parties. If the requirement of no public deficit (or of a maximum public deficit), or the prohibition of sending armed forces outside the national territory are constitutionalised, then the issue is to a large extent removed from public debate, and the need for parties and candidates to take clear stands is reduced correspondingly. Alternatively, issues and policies can be transferred to domains where legitimisation principles other than political exist. Issues may be *pre-defined* and left to the decisions of bodies where competence is the key resource: defending the value of the currency can be defined as an institutional goal and thus made the preserve of central bank authorities; controlling the political fairness of the mass media can be devolved to bodies and authorities on the basis of the same principle. Issues and policies may also be *pre-defined* and *pre-decided* by internationally accepted or imposed priorities and goals (EEC decisions; IMF requirements, GATT agreements, etc.) which may be used by political parties as a defence against taking clear political stands on controversial questions. Finally, issues and

policies can be left to the actors who control the resources for their implementation <sup>46</sup>; to forms of 'negotiated order' in which key economic actors agree to regulate macro-economic policies of interest to the parts <sup>47</sup>. Whether the principle invoked is efficiency, competence, or resource control the actual result may be an important muting of party differentials in key domains. The amount of policies which are 'pre-defined' and 'pre-decided' in this way may be large and varies from country to country as well as over time.

This long list of potential sources of collusive behaviour on the part of political competitors for votes is not meant to 'denounce' or otherwise 'fault' these practices, but simply to bring attention to the point that their diffusion is a crucial empirical dimension in the study of the conditions of competitive politics <sup>48</sup>. However, there are barriers and obstacles to political cartellisation and collusion. The first is imperfect knowledge of the consequences of rivalry and of the profit of collusion. When considering collusion,



parties/candidates are uncertain as to the profit of this strategy as opposed to an adversarial competitive strategy. The second obstacle is the difficulty of determining the division of profits among colluders. Parties may be in disagreement and/or scared of the potential disagreement over how the advantages of collusion should be then distributed. In the first case uncertainty concerns the unforeseen potential reactions of the voters. In the second case uncertainty concerns the divisions of the advantages among the actors. In both cases, the result is rather unstable choices between more co-operative and more competitive relationships in the struggle for the vote.

It goes without saying that the investigation of the dimension of decidability is removed by *fiat* if the structure of preferences is taken as exogenous to party competition. In empirical reserach, it is impossible to postulate or take for granted competition on the offer side. Laying too much emphasis on competition, we may easily forget that collusion is the essence of politics, that 'political

classes' have much in common at stake to defend, that political elites can easily agree to share a value through the voluntarily equalisation of effort rather than fighting for it, that competition on the offer side is not a natural outcome and requires special conditions in order to flourish. Continuous efforts are made to avoid it and therefore, continuous costs are met in order to preserve it <sup>49</sup>. Paraphrasing Gaetano Mosca's famous point about military rule, the real question it is not why parties sometimes collude, but why they do not do so all the time.

### **Vulnerability**

In economic life and theory, the existence of a given product does not preclude the existence of a different one that can be chosen instead. The products offered in a more or less decidable way to voters are mutually exclusive. Given the coercive nature of politics, if a policy is implemented a different policy cannot be implemented at the same time. There cannot be two agencies legislating and/or regulating on the same

issue.

The exclusivity of policy and legislation rests on the exclusivity of government. There is a threshold for gaining the right to coerce

In economic life, a firm which sells 49% of a product is not a failure. In politics it may well be.

This basic difference is not often discussed in articles which focus on economic and political competition <sup>50</sup>. Vulnerability, originates from and is meaningful only in relation to the exclusivity of political authority. For this condition of competition, no analogy with the market and economic competition seems possible.

It is not necessary to discuss this problem at length as a rich literature already exists. Vulnerability may be defined as the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted and replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of changes in voter of partisan preference. In effect, vulnerability



has two psychological effects: 1) parties perceive the chance of gaining or loosing the exclusive good of public authority; 2) voters perceive an increase in the potential impact of their vote on the final outcome of governmental formation and/or renovation.

In the American context, there has been a great deal of post-war studies concerning this particular dimension of competition. The reference point of these studies was of course the American two party system where it was easier to collapse several conditions of competition into the single one of vulnerability. Therefore, vulnerability is regarded as being basically the same thing as competition, although the phenomenon was given different names. The names range from 'closeness of the electoral outcome' to 'uncertainty of the electoral result'; from 'performance sensitivity' to 'decisiveness of elections for governmental turnover'; from 'changeability' <sup>51</sup> to 'competitiveness' or 'systemic competition'. The term 'performance sensitivity' implies that the incumbent position is vulnerable as a result of the sensitivity of available voters to its

performance when in government. This is to say and to demand far too much. The basic difference between the other terms is that some of them tend to stress actual aspects of governmental turnover, while others tend to stress the potential turnover. Schlesinger, for instance, positively refers his concept of vulnerability to the 1) number of elections won by each party; and 2) the rapidity with which parties alternate in office. He argues that 'perhaps the rate of alternation is even more important in giving the participants a sense of competition than is the overall division of victories'<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, 'decisiveness' of elections for governmental outcome' or 'changeability' stress the actual result of competition. Insisting on actual alternation means that at every given moment the perception of the vulnerability of government is the result of past experiences. The obvious critique is that vulnerability may be present without actual turnover taking place or vice versa.

To stress 'closeness' of electoral returns in terms of votes or seats, or symmetry of the distribution of

votes and seats <sup>53</sup>, or the concept of 'uncertainty' of electoral outcome' refers to the psychological effect linked to the absence of safety, rather than the actual result. Closeness and uncertainty may not result into turnover but still provide their supposed effect on competition <sup>54</sup>. Yet, without any prior information, how can the level of closeness or symmetry which would guarantee vulnerability be ascertained? What if close elections were repeated over time with the same governmental outcome?

Both the dimension of actual past record and present uncertainty have to be incorporated into the idea of vulnerability. Some element of the objective closeness of electoral returns must give rise to a sense of unsafety for incumbents and a sense of opportunity for opponents, but at the same time this objective base can not be defined without reference to some record of past experience. For this reason, in the great variety of measures of electoral vulnerability experimented in the context of the federal and state level as well as for presidential, governors and legislative elections in the United States <sup>55</sup>, I prefer the kind of



measures which are expressed in the form of a ratio between some objective element of closeness of the race at a given moment and some objective element indicating the past competitive performance of the system. I regard as very interesting Stern's measure<sup>56</sup>. In a given unit (local township in his case), he takes the vote for the majority party/candidate and relates it to the standard deviations of the same majority vote in the previous elections. If that vote minus two standard deviations is still over 50%, then the government is safe. If that vote minus two standard deviations is below 50% but the same vote minus one standard deviation is above 50% then the contest is classified as marginal. If that vote minus a standard deviation falls below 50% then government is competitive. In so doing, Stern's measure links the majoritarian advantage of the winning party to the past variability of this margin<sup>57</sup>. If one were to substitute the three terms 'safe', 'marginal' and 'competitive' with the single dimension of the level of vulnerability, we go from a minimum vulnerability in the first case to the maximum in the latter. I am currently working on incumbents' vulnerability using a

measure that shares the same logic. For each given election, I consider the distance from the majority thresholds of each party/vocation/candidate. This distance is then related to the average aggregate volatility of previous elections along the incumbent versus non-incumbent dimension. For instance, a 10% margin over the 50% threshold does not give a secure indication of the real or perceived vulnerability of the incumbent unless it is related to the average aggregate voting switch which takes place between incumbents and the opposition. If that average aggregate voting shift is 20%, that a 10 % margin does not make for safety. If, on the contrary, it is only 2%, then a 10 % majority distance makes for considerably little vulnerability<sup>58</sup>. The same level of closeness of the votes between government and opposition makes government safe in a system with low electoral availability along the line which separate majority and opposition, and vulnerable in a system with high volatility.

There is no need to discuss at any great length this measures in this paper. Suffice it to underline that

the elements of uncertainty and unsafety associated with the concept of incumbents' vulnerability are not fully tapped by measures of closeness or distance alone. Something is required which indicates the perception of incumbents and opponents about the likeliness of that distance to be matched by aggregate voters shifts. Symmetry of voting can be a good proxy for information we do not have, but strictly speaking it is not adequate.

Vulnerability is a system property. It refers to the unit of the party system. It results from specific configurations of the number, the strength and the alliance-opposition relationships among the units of the system without belonging to any of them. It presents important empirical links with other conditions of competition like contestability, availability and decidability, but it is independent from all of them. Only two conditions can be regarded as necessary for the maximisation of governmental vulnerability:

- 1) the visibility of the division line between government and opposition;



2) an average electoral availability along the incumbent/opposition line large enough to approach (or bypass) the majority margin of incumbents.

In relation to the first condition, the visibility of the incumbents/opposition camps is decisively blurred in cases of : 1) greatly oversized majorities; 2) truly minority government (to the extent that they rest on collusion with the opposition in parliament); 3) frequent change in government composition during the legislature. Truly minority government poses a special challenge to the concept of vulnerability. Minority governments are vulnerable by definition as their survival rests on some sort of collusion with non-governmental parties. However, their high parliamentary vulnerability may result in their electoral invulnerability. The problem is what electoral (non parliamentary) mechanism would make a minority government vulnerable. One can imagine that minority governments are relatively insensitive to electoral returns because their *raison d'être* is not electoral. At the same time we are not prepared to go so far as to say that the electoral process is

irrelevant to them. We have to find some better argument than the 'non applicable' one in this case.

As far as the second condition is concerned, it is often argued that what matters for vulnerability is more the 'decisive location' of the available electorate than its sheer quantity (although one can say that the higher the quantity the higher the likelihood that a sufficient share of it will be located so as to contribute to vulnerability). The 'decisive location' of available voters is unquestionably crucial only if a spatial representation of politics is given. Whether a spatial dimension of politics exists (in the electorate), the amount of dimension it has and how good an instrument to describe concrete historical situation it is, remain empirical questions. Therefore, we can not make the 'decisive location' a necessary condition. What matters is 'sufficient' incumbent/opposition electoral availability. Spatial location can not be incorporated as a 'necessary' condition for vulnerability. As for 'symmetry' (or closeness) of the vote/seats distribution, which is often listed as a necessary

condition, I have already argued that it is not. It can, perhaps, be considered a facilitating one.

### **The relationship among the different dimensions of competition**

In Table 3, I have summarised the main points concerning the four dimensions of competition when it is regarded as a process leading to elite responsiveness to voters preferences. The four conditions of contestability versus closure, availability versus encapsulation, decidability versus collusion and vulnerability versus safety of tenure identify dimensions which can be maximised or minimised. If contestability is minimised, the process can go so far as to endanger pluralism, which is also as we said, a defining condition of democracy. Beyond the minimum necessary level of pluralism, contestability can vary, but a maximisation of contestability is likely to bring about excessive fragmentation on the offer side. When the forces of voter encapsulation are so strong as to lead to the extinction of electoral availability, then electoral transactions are also extinct. Whatever change is made



to the political offer, it is unlikely that buyers will be found. On the other hand, the maximisation of electoral availability points to a situation in which every voter is likely to change his/her mind. The consequence is an exceptional volatility from election to election.

See Table 3 at page 88

When decidability is brought to a minimum, party positions on issues and policies are blurred and unclear, issues tend to slide from 'divisive' to 'valence' or to be simply muted and/or transferred to another domain of decision making different from the electoral political channel. Consequences of collusive tendencies may include growing political dissatisfaction, voter defection and even mass disenfranchisement. At the other extreme, a situation

is defined in which the maximisation of decidability brings about very high policy differentials and a very adversarial style of politics. This tendency can result into clear ideological polarisation. Finally, safety of governmental tenure strongly undermines responsiveness. Yet, maximisation of vulnerability has its own drawbacks. In the extreme case it could bring about a 'permanent campaign' syndrome<sup>59</sup>: frequent feedback on government popularity, on the relative salience of issue in the mass public, and on the preference of the public (even on issues not yet articulated by the opinion makers); more awareness by citizens of governmental actions or possible actions and better chances to react more visibly to them; correspondingly, governments' sense of being more exposed to political pressures from the general public; constant watching of opinion polls by politicians in order to evaluate the response of public opinion to policy options

; politicians' belief in their capacity to immediately estimate the costs in terms of support for specific decisions (far greater than the capacity to appreciate the gains in support of the same decisions);

postponement of critical and divisive decisions by elected officials for fear of alienating potential supporters.

It follows that each dimension impinges on the other not in a linear and additive way, but in a rather contradictory one. High contestability may allow high fragmentation. Intense minorities may find it more preferable to enter the electoral race than to articulate their demands within more encompassing political parties, even if motivated by single-issues or small range concerns . This is likely to have a negative effect on the clear distinction between government and opposition, and therefore on vulnerability. High vulnerability may lead to low decidability and no differentiation of the political offer. 'Perfect' vulnerability is achieved when two parties(coalitions) of equal size compete for a few median voters (in theory just for the median voter). Unless the degree of contestability allows for credible third party alternatives, party willingness to shape clear and alternative choices to voters is likely to be nil in this case <sup>60</sup>. In order to ensure



decidability, one needs a certain amount of electoral availability which is not functional to vulnerability. At the same time, excessively volatile electorates, resulting from declining cultural and organisational ties, may bring about an issue or policy 'balkanised' electorate with no dimensionality whatsoever <sup>61</sup>. A certain amount of vote identification and vote stability is necessary to allow parties to plan the offer, to interpret the reaction of the electorate, and to reduce the risks of collusion resulting from their failing in this respect.

In my view, a conspicuously attractive interaction takes place between decidability and vulnerability. Decidability requires clear alternative choices: a clear-cut policy or programmatic profile of candidates and parties (coalitions); no muting of major and divisive issues; no transformation of divisive issues in valence issue. Vulnerability rests on institutional solutions which avoid fragmentation (majority formula), and allow clear attribution of political responsibility (unitary executive, direct

responsibility). It also rests on political conditions: no disagreement on fundamentals (avoid that performance evaluation be overshadowed by consideration of system defence); a broad electoral coalition open to all sectors of the population; the absence of polarising ideological issues; the bypassing of the historical divisions and the identities linked to them; a strong orientation of the vote toward performance-evaluation.

To what extent are these two sets of conditions mutually compatible? Is it possible to simultaneously maximise decidability and vulnerability? Probably not. A vicious circle may exist in which increasing responsiveness implies increasing credibility of sanctions for incumbents; the latter implies that increasing weight is given to median voter preferences by both governing and opposition parties; the latter implies the increasing non-differentiation of political offer, declining policy competition, declining decidability and, finally, reduced responsiveness to preferences. Certainly, sensitive far-from-median voters can exit. But the opportunity

to have their preferences considered is linked to their chance of obtaining an alternative new party. Maximising competition as vulnerability in the absence of easy exit options will result in the widening of what Matthews calls the 'ideological gap' between governmental positions and sections of the electorate<sup>62</sup>. The need to be 'competitive' at the governmental level may prevent parties from taking stands on controversial and divisive issues. In situations of high vulnerability established parties may be unwilling to take the risk of identifying clearly with policies and issues highlighting the cost to be shared by specific groups in exchange for broadly collective advantages whose electoral returns are uncertain. In these situations, there is a strong incentive to define issues in such a way that no opposing sides are identifiable, and to push parties to argue more about who is more competent or capable of assuring the achievement of consensually accepted principles, rather than arguing about which principles should be embodied in policy. For these reasons, new parties emerge which concentrate on issues removed and transformed into 'valence'



problems. Having no traditional constituency to defend, they can appeal across partisan lines. However, if new parties are needed for taking partisan stands on new issues, then a decline in the vulnerability at the system level may well be the result, so that what is gained in decidability is lost in vulnerability of incumbents.

Some recent tendencies of electioneering <sup>63</sup>, with their stress on candidate-centric campaigning, on fund raising as 'primary', on heavy concentration on radio and television campaign, packaging of candidates by professional advisers, well prepared, media controlled public appearances, parading before carefully screened audiences (up to the point of reducing appearances to chat-shows and 'infomericals') are the correlate of high leadership vulnerability, but they also tend to deprive the public, even the most informed part of it, of any real choice.

There may be too much pragmatism and incrementalism, as has been suggested, and the bringing of controversial issues before the public may be

welcomed. The increasing sharpness of policy alternatives will provide voters with the opportunity of making choices between clear-cut policy sets <sup>64</sup>. But there might also be too little influence of voters on government and leadership selection, as others argue. Thus, we should welcome the bringing about of coalition formula, of electoral institutions, of forms of government, of chief executive selection which will provide the voter with a direct say in the selection of alternative government. If we call the first good 'to have a choice' and the second 'to have a say', we end up with a difficult predicament: choice without say or say without choice.

An empirical study of competition has no way to escape its contradictory multi-dimensionality. This can only be avoided by stipulative decisions or assumptions. If the various conditions or dimensions of competition have complex relationships among themselves, this means that electoral competition cannot be conceived as a linear process going from zero or a minimum to a maximum, theoretically definable as 'perfect competition' <sup>65</sup>. This appealing metaphor comes to us

from economics but it is not applicable in politics if we agree that the parallel maximisation of all conditions of competition is not only impossible, because of the afore mentioned interactive effect among them, but also detrimental. One can not therefore speak of more or less competition, but rather of a different mix of contestability, availability, decidability and vulnerability, without being able to incorporate them into the single dimension of competition. The level of actual competition in any given setting is a point moving in a four dimensional space where no equilibrium can be found as the maximisation of one dimension comes at the expense of the others. It is necessary to abandon the analysis of an optimised system and to concentrate on the study of which alternative decisions are available and valid in practice. If all possible maximisation present weakness, unintended or contradictory results, then all reference to full information, to vote maximisation, to perfect vulnerability etc., are irrelevant from the operative point of view. It is better to concentrate on configurations that pass the test of feasibility. And



a different mix of each dimension can be evaluated only via choices motivated in each historical circumstance by the most needed values sought. We end up where we started: what form of competition and how much competition bring us back to the definition of the 'social value' that needs to be maximised in any given case.

Competition is not a defining characteristic of democracy but a property of which there can be more or less. However, it is not a uni-dimensional phenomenon which can be studied 'under optimal conditions'. If competition has to perform producing valuable (to third part) unintended effects of political interaction, it must remain within relatively narrow boundaries. Those conditions which in an optimal model perspective limit and contain competition, at the same time sustain it and make it viable. The set of normative factors, of social bonds, and of legal and institutional provisions<sup>66</sup> which shape group loyalties and identifications, which determine a certain amount of collusive practices and which prevent an outright competitive logic to prevail,

limiting both its scope and means, do not represent elements of 'imperfection', but conditions of viability. Obviously the factors which contain competition can be so powerful, encompassing and tight that the restraint on competition can suppress it altogether. At the same time, these confining conditions can be so weak that they do not have the capacity to contain competition, whose effects in different domains of political life can be detrimental to the same beneficial effects competition is thought to produce. Political competition needs constraining-sustaining conditions as it is unlikely to be effective in a world of rational, maximising, selfish independent actors as much as it is in a world of communal closed groups.





## Notes

<sup>1</sup> G. Simmel, *Conflict and The Web of Group Affiliation*, New York, The Free Press, 1955 (or. ed. 1908 and 1922), in particular pp. 58-85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58. If the prize is firmly in the hand of one adversary, and it needs be directly subtracted to him, then other less institutionalised forms of conflict prevail.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60

<sup>4</sup> This conception leads Simmel to criticise the socialist ideology of his time. The recognition of the purely technical character of these techniques (competition, socialism, glid) should force socialist ideologies and organisations to relinquish their claim to being a self-justifying aim and an ultimate value. They should rather argue calculating and appraising themselves in comparison with individualistic competition, in so far as it too is a mean to super-individual ends attainment. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Although differences exist in the definition of this power: votes, offices, influence on policy.

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1954 (4th ed.); A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper & Row, 1957.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow this term from A. Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension. Toward a New Economics*, New York, Free Press, 1988, in particular Ch. 12: *Encapsulated Competition*.

<sup>8</sup> J. A. Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> A. Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 19, footnote n. 11.

<sup>12</sup> B. Barry, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> A. Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 107 and ff.

<sup>14</sup> J. A. Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 269 and p. 282 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> An exhaustive review may identify different social values regarded as by-products of competition. For instance, a number of authors of economic formation define such unintended result as the 'elimination of unnecessary returns to party leaders and functionaries', where unnecessary returns are seemingly defined in terms of spoils. See G. J. Stigler, 'Economic Competition and Political Competition', *Public Choice*, 13 (1972), pp. 91-106. However, the only condition regarded as indispensable to avoid unnecessary returns is contestability. So it is not necessary to discuss this position, already implicit in the Schumpeterian vision.

<sup>16</sup> The most obvious example being equal or universal suffrage.

<sup>17</sup> For the discussion of the conditions of democracy see R. Dahl, *Poliarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971, p. 3 and ff. Note that he lists among them the right to compete for electoral support, but he does not go so far as to include political competition as such.

<sup>18</sup> G. Sartori, 'Democrazia competitiva ed élites politiche', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 7 (1977), p. 350.

<sup>19</sup> C. J. Friedrich, *Man and his Government*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1963

<sup>20</sup> This is the term used and discussed in S. Bartolini and P. Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> In a short discussion of the concept of competition K. Strom has mentioned three 'models' of party competition, labelling them 'contestability', 'conflict of interest' and 'performance sensitivity'; 'Interparty Competition in Advanced Democracies', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1 (1989), pp. 280-281. The definition of his first 'models' roughly corresponds to what I will discuss under the same label. The second does not correspond to any of my conditions. The third mixes aspects that I will discuss separately under the label of availability and decidability.

<sup>22</sup> R. D'Almondo, 'Democrazia e competizione', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 19 (1989), pp. 301-319, in particular p. 301, p. 302 and p. 303.

<sup>23</sup> G. J. Stigler, 'Perfect Competition, Historically Contemplated', *The Journal of Political Economy*, 65 (1957), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> The concept, although formulated much before, did not begin to receive explicit and systematic attention in the main stream of economics until the beginning of the 1870's; G. J. Stigler, 'Perfect Competition Historically Contemplated', *cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> G. J. Stigler, *Competition*, in *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, New York, MacMillan & The Free Press, 1968, vol. 3, pp. 181-82.

<sup>26</sup> J. K. Clark, 'Toward a Concept of Workable Competition', *American Economic Review*, 30 (1940) pp. 241-256.

<sup>27</sup> Ideology is introduced in a second stage, to reduce the implicit huge information costs.

<sup>28</sup> By 'sensitivity' is normally meant 'issue sensitivity'. Against this term three basic criticism were advanced:

- a) according to the findings of the early American public opinion studies, issue voting is not separated from party voting. See A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, W. E. Miller and D. E. Stokes, *The American Voter: An Abridgement*, New York, Wiley, 1964, p. 78;
- b) the term issue-sensitive is not correct because anyway there are inconsistencies in the presentation of issues (i.e. it is not easy to know where parties-candidates stand on each issues; very often ambiguous and confused stances). So an issue-sensitive voter could not make-up his mind. See D. Robertson, *A Theory of Party Competition*, London, Wiley, 1976, p. 13 for a list of such inconsistencies in party messages and stances;
- c) issue voting in inherently multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to a uni-dimensional space. So spatial models work poorly with respect to issues and issue-voting. See G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 330-333, who prefers to speak of party images as condensed issue-packages. In the context of this argument, my definition of the available voter does not make reference to the origins of this availability, to how the available voter makes up his mind, and to whether his/her position can be represented in spatial terms.

<sup>29</sup> On these measures see S. Bartolini, 'La volatilità elettorale', *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 16 (1986), pp. 363-400; and S. Bartolini and P. Mair, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-37.

<sup>30</sup> For a review of individual level volatility studies based on the transition matrices technique see D. Denver, *Conclusion*, in I. Crewe and D. Denver (ed.), *Electoral Change in Western Democracies; A Framework for Analysis*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, pp. 400-412.

<sup>31</sup> C. van der Eljk and E. V. Oppenhuis, 'European Parties' Performance in Electoral Competition', *European Journal of Political Research*, 19 (1991), pp. 55-80.



<sup>32</sup> A. Downs, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>33</sup> 'A Theory of the Calculus of Voting', *American Political Science Review*, 62 (1968), pp. 25-43 and *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1973. They formalise this calculus in the following equation:

$$R = PB - C,$$

where

R = the expected net utility of voting less the utility of abstaining;

P = the probability of affecting the outcome;

B = the differential benefits over outcomes (the party differential);

C = the cost of voting.

<sup>34</sup> M. Laver and W. B. Hunt, *Policy and Party Competition*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 3. I will make reference to this work that discusses and summarises the position of rational choice theory on the issue.

How this postulate is essential to formal modelling is stated several times in the book. A number of critical notes concerning the postulate of exogenous preferences are in P. Dunleavy and H. Ward, 'Exogenous Voter Preferences and Parties with State Power: Some Internal Problems of Economic Theories of Party Competition', *British Journal of Political Science*, 11 (1981), pp. 352-363. Also relevant for the debate about preference shaping or preference adapting competition is P. Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, 112-144.

<sup>35</sup> Laver and Hunt

make the hypothesis that the structure of preference in the electorate could be shaped by party competition itself. But this is a rather scholastic and rapidly discarded hypothesis:

'If the aims of the theorist are relatively modest, relating to patterns observed at a particular election or to a short sequence of elections, then the structure of electoral preference may be taken as given' (*Ibid.*, p. 10). They add that this assumption 'may seem on the face of it to be a relatively non controversial approach to take, though it seems so mainly because such matters have largely been ignored by both pure theorists and empirical researchers' (*Ibid.*, p. 11). Therefore, the choice is a matter of 'faith' and they 'make no bones about putting our faith in the assumption that tastes are exogenous to party competition' (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

<sup>36</sup> It can be conceived as an heuristic simplification. If the current structure of electoral preferences was shaped by past party activities, there are good reasons to believe that the future structures will be determined by current party activities. Even in presence of a stable short term structure, one can work for the bringing about of a different one. A party may find itself cut off from chances of victory given the existing structure of preferences of the electorate, but it is not necessarily compelled to adapt itself to this structure. Given that what it does may determine future changes in the voters' preferences, party competition is not only an adaptive effort.

<sup>37</sup> Downs too assumes preferences of voters as being intrinsic, that is shaped by some force which is both prior and independent from party competition. However in a small passage he states: 'though parties will move ideologically to adjust to the distribution, under some circumstances, they will also attempt to move voters toward their own location, then altering it' [the distribution], *op. cit.*, p. 140. This remark is not developed in the work because it implied a revision of the whole model, entirely anchored on the solid rock of the distribution of voters' preferences. Downs' successors have more explicitly assumed that party competition does not affect the distribution of preferences.



<sup>38</sup> See the notes by Simmel, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-76, who discusses the cases of corporations.

<sup>39</sup> Two 'pure' examples of the consequences in different arenas of party choices about the decidability of the electoral offer are represented by the Dutch Socialists' strategy in the 1977 elections and the Italian Lega in the 1994 elections. The first made their positions far more decidable, opting for an adversarial strategy, with the result of winning the electorate but losing the government. The second, in blurring their profile in a large alliance may have won the government but lost the electorate.

<sup>40</sup> A clear presentation of the linkages between the different arenas of the party system is in M. Laver, 'Party Competition and Party System Change. The Interaction of Coalition Bargaining and Electoral Competition', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 1 (1989), 301-324, esp. pp. 302-305.

<sup>41</sup> D. E. Stokes, *Spatial Models of Party Competition*, in A. Campbell *et al.*, *Elections and the Political Order*, New York, John Wiley, 1966, pp. 61-179, in particular pp. 170-173. Valence issues can be defined as non-dimensional issues, that is issues which can not help to order preferences in spatial terms.

<sup>42</sup> Budge and Farlie present an alternative view of issues. The classic argument of having parties located at, say, 30% versus 60% welfare spending assumes that both parties take stands on the 'same' issue.

They have argued that parties may try to compete by manipulating the salience of different issue dimensions. That is, giving prominence and emphasis to those issues on which they are strong and which are more favourable to them and, at the same time, downplaying those on which they feel weaker.

If parties do so, it may result that instead of talking about the same problems, they talk about different problems and what decides the election is the preference of electors for a type of issues 'owned' by a type of party. See I. Budge and D. Farlie, *Explaining and Predicting Elections: Issues, Effects and Party Strategies in Twenty-three Democracies*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1983, pp. 152-155.

<sup>43</sup> W. Schneider, *Styles of Competition*, in R. Rose (ed.), *Electoral Participation, A Comparative Analysis*, London, Sage, 1980, pp. 91-97. The centrality of 'divisiveness' was underlined also in an earlier paper: 'Issues, Voting, and Cleavages: A Methodology and Some Tests', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 18 (1974), pp. 111-146.

<sup>44</sup> W. Schneider, *Styles of Competition, cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>46</sup> The extreme case of the devolution of political issues to forces controlling resources for implementation is when they are left to the market forces.

<sup>47</sup> An interesting open question is whether these negotiated orders impose themselves in situation of ineffective politico-electoral competition or do they determine the enfeeblement of such competition. When existing, such orders reduce the scope of electoral policy competition as policy is decided elsewhere. At the same time, they also require as a prerequisite such reduction of the scope of electoral competition. Actually the dynamics of electoral competition should normally represent a mechanism of instability for such negotiated orders. Actors aiming at the electoral conquest of office could challenge such orders, reserving for themselves the right to accept or refuse them in view of their electoral goals.

<sup>48</sup> Attention to this point, with particular reference to the development in party organisation, is given in R. Katz and P. Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1 (1995), forthcoming.

<sup>49</sup> The institutionalised political collusion of the Austrian post W.W.II coalitions shows as far as one can go in this direction. The great coalitions of socialists and Christian democrats operated on the basis of 'pacts' ratified by the two partners after each re-negotiation of the coalition.

The 1949 and 1953 pacts were kept secret; the 1956, 1959 and 1963 pacts were made public. 'According to each of these pacts, decisions arrived at in the coalition committee (consisting of the top leaders of the two partners) are enacted by the unanimous vote of the parliamentary delegations of both partners. A complex clause of the pact of 1963 allowing some exception to this unanimity rule soon became the subject of controversy between the partners...'

Coalition pacts and coalition committees (called 'working committee' since 1963), as well as the provision for mandatory parliamentary support for bill agreed upon in the coalition committee were, of course, a-constitutional practices.

The loosening of the terms of the coalition achieved in the 1963 pact worked in this way: if no agreement was achieved on a specific policy in the coalition committee, each partner may introduce a motion regarding it 3 months after the date of disagreement. Parliament had to vote 5 months later. The party which loose may demand a referendum. See F. C. Engelmann, *Austria: The Pooling of Opposition*, in R. A. Dahl (ed.), *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966, p. 265 and p. 281.

<sup>50</sup> It is addressed in G. J. Stigler, 'Economic Competition and Political Competition', *Public Choice*, 13 (1972), pp. 91-106, esp. p. 98

. He concludes that this difference is not so important as to challenge the analogy between political and economic competition. His point is that competition for authority is not a zero sum game; even losing parties have some form of influence on public policy and the percentage of votes/seats can be taken as an indicator of the general influence on the public policy of each party (together with other variables like federal government etc. that admit influence of opposition parties). Stigler basically denies the governmental executive threshold which offers to the winner the position of monopoly provider of public policy. It makes it a question of degree of influence.

<sup>51</sup> D. E. Elkins, 'The Measurement of Party Competition', *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), p. 686 uses this term.

<sup>52</sup> J. A. Schlesinger, 'A Two Dimensional Scheme for Classifying the States according to the Degree of Inter-party Competition', *American Political Science Review*, 49 (1955), 1120-1128, in particular p. 1122. The competitive party system then becomes that one where parties present a similar number of electoral victories and a high alternation over a given period of time. Equal number of victories but low alternation rate make for cyclically competitive party systems. The remaining are one-party non competitive party system which can be distinguished between one-party competitive and one-party cyclical.

<sup>53</sup> The line chosen by A. Ranney *Parties in State Politics*, in H. Jacob and K. Vines (eds), *Politics in American States*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1965, pp. 62-71.

<sup>54</sup> R. E. Dowson and J. A. Robinson, 'Inter-party Competition, Economic Variables and Welfare Policies', *Journal of Politics*, 25 (1963), pp. 265-289, stress this dimension of 'opportunity' rather than actual result. Also D. E. Elkins, 'The Measurement of Party Competition', *cit.*, insists on opportunity and possibility rather than actual records. His definition of competition (in the sense of vulnerability) is the probability that the outcome could have been otherwise given the existing distribution of loyalties. It is adopted in close connection with his utilisation of 'weak identifiers' and 'no-identifiers' as available electors.



<sup>55</sup> For a general review to the middle of the 1960's see D. G. Pfeiffer, 'The Measure of Inter-party Competition and Systemic Stability', *American Political Science Review*, 61 (1967), pp. 457-467. There are also bad example: one is N. D. Milder, 'Definitions and Measures of the Degree of Macro-Level Party Competition in Multiparty Systems', *Comparative Political Studies*, 6 (1974), pp. 431-456; who proposes Rae's index of fractionalisation, L. Mayer's index [An Analysis of Measures of Crosscutting and Fragmentation', *Comparative Politics*, 4 (1972), pp. 405-417]; and its own

measure which is a derivation of the other two. All these indices measure the distribution of forces and the number of parties at the same time, and they fail to distinguish among different configurations of party systems in terms of vulnerability. Measures of vulnerability have been used in American literature as explanatory variable of a variety of factors as inter-state variation in legislative performance, public policy, spending, etc. The explication of variation in turnout has probably been the most investigated fields. Vulnerability in this case becomes important because it maximise the U factor in the calculus of voting (see before): the expectation of the voter to be decisive for the outcome. Results have been controversial: see Kelley S., Ayres R., Bowen W. G., 'Registration and Voting: Putting First Things First', *American Political Science Review*, 61, 1967, pp. 359-379; Kim J. O., Petrocik J. R., Enokson S. N., 'Voter Turnout among the American States', *American Political Science Review*, 69, 1975, pp. 107-123;

Aldrich J. H., 'Some Problems in Testing Two Rational Models of Participation', *American Journal of Political Science*, 20, 1976, pp. 713-734

; G. Bingham Powell Jr, *Voting Turnout in Thirty Democracies: Partisan, Legal, and Socio-Economic Influences*, in R. Rose (ed.), *Electoral Participation. A Comparative Analysis*, London, Sage, 1980, pp. 5-34; Jackman R. W., 'Political Institutions and Voter Turnout in Industrial Democracies', *American Political Science Review*, 81 (1987), n. 2, pp. 405-423. Less frequently, vulnerability has been studied as dependant variable. See S. C. Patterson and G. A. Caldeira, 'The Etiology of Partisan Competition', *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), pp. 691-707.

<sup>56</sup> M. Stern, 'Measuring Interparty Competition: A proposal and a Test of A Method', *Journal of Politics*, 34 (1972), pp. 889-904; see also the modification of such measure proposed by D. B. Meltz, 'An Index for the Measurement of Interparty Competition', *Behavioral Science*, 18 (1973), pp. 59-63.

<sup>57</sup> If P is the proportion of votes to the majority party/candidate and  $\sigma$  is the standard deviation of that majority vote in previous elections, then:

if  $P - 2\sigma > 50\%$  = safe

if  $P - 2\sigma < 50\% < P - \sigma$  = marginal

if  $P - \sigma < 50\%$  = competitive.

<sup>58</sup> If P is the percentage of votes or seats of the majority party/coalition/candidate, and D is the distance between P and the 50% threshold ( $D = P - 50$ ) and MIV is the mean incumbency volatility in, say, the previous five elections, then my measure of vulnerability is the following:

$V = D/MIV$

High vulnerability is expected when D is lower than MIV and the fraction tends to 0. Low vulnerability results when D is greater than MIV and the fraction is greater than 1.

<sup>59</sup> S. Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1982

<sup>60</sup> For instance, the lower level of decidability of the political offer in the United States with respect to Great Britain can be in part attributed to the low contestability resulting from the various legal barriers which defend the two party system in 50 states, and the consequent poor historical performance of third parties. The role of the Liberals and of territorially concentrated nationalist parties as a potentially viable alternative to Conservative and Labour party and as an exit option for dissatisfied voters, has helped to avoid excessive offer non-differentiation and to keep high the decidability of the British competition.

<sup>61</sup> On the declining partisanship and divisiveness of issues see J. C. Thomas, *The Decline of Ideology in Western Political Parties*, London, Sage, 1975; and J. C. Thomas *Ideological Trends in Western*



Table 1: The structure of voter preferences

structure of electoral preference assumed to be	structure of electoral preference assumed to be	
	exogenous to party competition	endogenous to party competition
stable	<i>TYPE I</i> ( <i>preference drive comp.</i> )	<i>N.P.</i>
changing	<i>TYPE II</i>	<i>TYPE III</i> ( <i>preference shaping comp.</i> )

*Political Parties*, in P. H. Merkl (ed.), *Western European Party Systems. Trends and Prospects*, New York, The Free Press, 1980. pp. 348-366.

<sup>62</sup> R. C. O. Matthews, *Competition in Economy and Polity*, in R. C. O. Matthews (ed.), *Economy and Democracy*, London, Macmillan, 1985, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> On the recent trends spreading in electioneering see

H. A. Semetko, J. G. Blumler, M. Gurevitch and D. H. Weaver, *The Formation of Campaign Agendas: A Comparative Analysis of Party and Media Roles in Recent American and British Elections*, Hillsdale (N.J.), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991;

D. E. Butler and A. Ranney (eds), *Electioneering: A Comparative Study of Continuity and Change*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992; W. Field, 'On the Americanisation of Electioneering', *Electoral Studies*, 13 (1994), pp. 58-63.

<sup>64</sup> On this theme, the two reference works in the American context are

V. O. Key Jr., *The Responsible Electorate*, New York, Vintage Books, 1966 for the idea that alternative coalitions leave the choice to rational electors on the basis of past-performance; and

E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960, for the sceptical and critical attitude about the electoral process leading to the exclusion of major issues, the avoidance of clear-cut policy-alternative, the non representation of vast segment of the population, and consequent mass disenfranchisement

..

<sup>65</sup> I disagree with R. D'Alimonte for whom different conditions of competition are part of a unique and uni-dimensional phenomenon and constitute steps toward the perfect competition: 'there are not two phenomena which require two different concepts for their identification: the phenomenon is unique: competition'. *op. cit.*, p. 309

<sup>66</sup> My argument here from A. Etzioni's critique of the neo-classical idea that competition will organise the use of resources in a maximally efficient way without external intervention, generating internally the rules of the game which produce its beneficial effects. See A. Etzioni, *op. cit.*

Table 2: Typology of Issues  
 issue is

party  
 choice  
 is

	divisive	non-divisive
clear	<i>partisan issue</i>	<i>election issue</i>
non-clear	<i>critical issue</i>	<i>abstention issue</i>



Table 3: The dimensions of Electoral Competition: A Summary

dimension	contestability	availability	decidability	vulnerability
polar opposite	closure	encapsulation	collusion	safety of tenure
indicates	openness of the market; supply side	openness of the market; demand side	party differentials	expectations about the decisiveness of elections for the governmental outcome
conditions	low threshold for accession	weakness of identifications	clearness of party positions divisive issues no muting or deflection of issues	visibility of the dividing line between government and opposition (decisive location of available voters)
status	necessary condition of pluralism	necessary and non sufficient condition for decidability and vulnerability	[contestability, and availability are not sufficient conditions of decidability and vulnerability] necessary condition for responsiveness	necessary condition of responsiveness [vulnerability alone is not a sufficient condition of responsiveness]
consequence of minimisation	excessive fragmentation	electoral instability	excessive polarisation	'permanent campaign' syndrome
consequence of minimisation	no exit options for voters	no incentive to product differentiation	no differentiation of the offer (political indifference and/or al	unresponsiveness



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